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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

EPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2005

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n a story by
dward D. Hoch

Frederic Dannay, co-author under the pseudonym Ellery Queen

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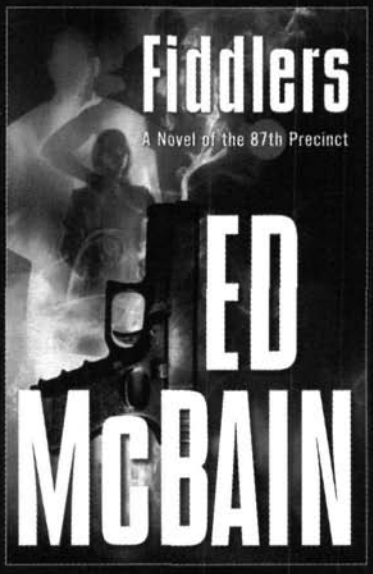

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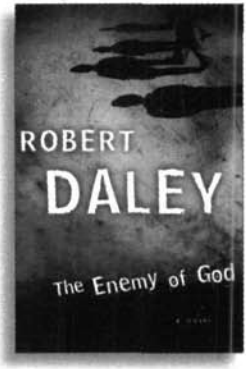

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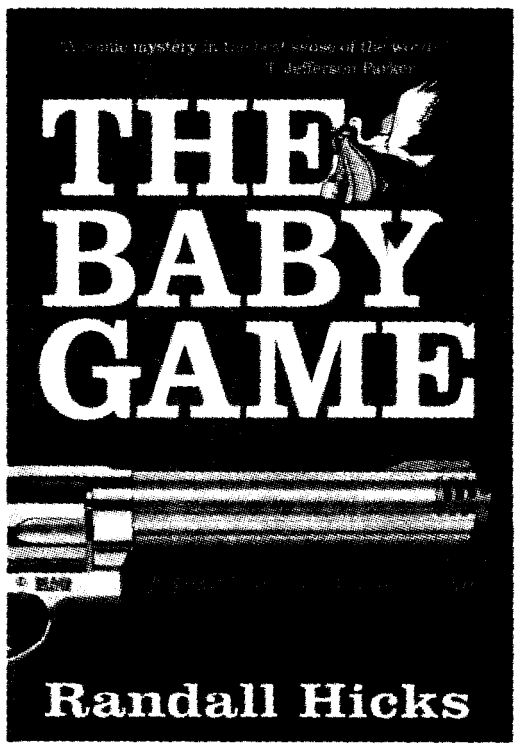

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Don Yates is a noted book collector and a professor and translator of Spanish.

Remembering Fred Dannay

by Donald A. Yates

In *EQMM*'s January 2005 issue, in which began a year-long tribute to the two New York cousins who wrote as Ellery Queen, Steven E. Steinbock provided a sketch of the specific role played by Manfred B. Lee, whose birth month was January. In this issue, we celebrate the centenary of Frederic Dannay's birth—October 20, 1905.

While the true nature of the collaboration was kept a secret for many years, today it is known that Dannay was the source of the intricate plots of the Queen novels and Lee was the author who fleshed them out. Although there were certain fundamental personality differences between Dannay and Lee, they nonetheless worked together with unparalleled success for the better part of forty years.

Lee was the more private individual of the two, while Dannay ended up serving as the front man for the great audience that their work attracted. It is true that they traveled as a team on a lecture circuit in the 'thirties, their identities concealed by masks, and in 1933-34, working together, brought out four issues of a short-lived publication called *Mystery League.* They also collaborated closely in scripting the Ellery Queen radio shows in the 'forties. But after the creation of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in 1941 Dannay alone emerged as the more public voice of the collaboration.

A passionate collector, Dannay amassed an extensive library of mystery and crime fiction from which he drew the best examples of detective literature produced in the genre's first hundred years for the pages of *EQMM.* He was also a gifted editor, offering generous encouragement as well as advising new writers on how to bring their stories into publishable form. The number of authors whose first stories appeared in the magazine, more often than not nursed along with Fred's suggestions, is truly astonishing. Moreover, he organized annual short-story contests, with substantial prizes, at a time when other mystery and crime-fiction markets were gradually shrinking. One may well wonder what might have happened to the detective short story in the 'fifties if *EQMM* had not been prominently recruiting new writers and courageously holding the line.

I was one of the fortunate recipients of Fred Dannay's advice and friendship. After reading *The Chinese Orange Mystery* as a teenager, I began to collect the Queen books. Eventually, I worked up the nerve to write to Dannay, whose home address was given in ads he placed in the magazine that asked readers' help in locating elusive titles for his collection. This led to a correspondence that lasted for many years. At one point, in the summer of 1946, when I was sixteen, I decided that our friendship was intimate enough to permit a personal visit. So

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I packed up all my Queen editions in a suitcase and took a Greyhound bus from my home in Massachusetts to New York City.

My first stop the following morning was at the offices of *EQMM* on Lexington Avenue. There I met managing editor Mildred Falk, who was happy to provide me with all the missing issues of the magazine that I needed, going back to the Fall 1941 first issue. Before I left, I mentioned that I was heading to Brooklyn to see Fred. She asked me if I had made an appointment and I replied that I hadn't, pointing out (presumptuously, it seems to me now) that we were friends.

When I knocked at the door of the brownstone at 1199 Carroll Street, it was Fred Dannay himself who answered. I explained what I had brought in my suitcase. He smiled and invited me to come in. We climbed the stairs to his study and he spent several hours of his afternoon showing me the highlights of his collection, chatting about mysteries, and, before I left, signing every one of the books I had brought along.

Looking back now on that magical afternoon, I think that my cordial welcome was in large part owing to a discreet phone call from Mildred Falk. But it became clear over the years that this expression of gentle kindness was not out of character for Fred. He was a man with a genuinely warm and open nature. He had one reservation, however, that he rarely made an exception to: He was uncomfortable speaking in public and he refused many invitations to speak before an audience about the creation and cultivation of Ellery Queen. He did eventually find a place where he could talk easily with others, but it was in a college classroom. He was invited in 1958 by the University of Texas in Austin to teach a course in creative writing and spent a semester there working with students who were interested in learning how to write fiction.

As the Queen name and accomplishments became ever more widely known, fan clubs began to appear. Some twenty years ago, I was pleased to be able to ship off a complete run of *EQMM* to the organizer of the Japanese Ellery Queen society. And other honors have been bestowed over the years. There were the anniversaries: the 1954 *Silver Anniversary Tribute to Ellery Queen from Authors, Critics, Editors, and Famous Fans,* complied in 1954 by Queen's publisher, Little, Brown & Company; the 1969 Mystery Writers of America dinner to salute the first forty years of the fictional Ellery Queen—the span of the writings about him tied, at that point, with that of Arthur Conan Doyle's writings about Sherlock Holmes; in 1979, a celebration organized by Mystery Ink Bookstore's Dilys Winn to mark the 50th anniversary of the first Queen novel, *The Roman Hat Mystery;* and in 1991, a gathering of friends to mark the first half-century of *EQMM.*

And now we have this homage to Dannay and Lee in the magazine Fred edited for forty-one years, until his death on September 3, 1982. This is something we can all participate in enthusiastically because the contribution of Dannay and Lee is so great and so lasting. ●

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The Misadventures of Ellery Queen

by Jon L. Breen

I confess I stole the title of this piece, but it was inevitable. Ellery Queen (certainly the Frederic Dannay half and maybe the Manfred B. Lee half as well) showed his/their love of parodies and pastiches by editing a whole volume of them, *The Misadventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1944), which included serious tributes such as Vincent Starrett's classic "The Unique Hamlet" alongside comical cases for sleuths with names like Sherlaw Kombs, Holmlock Shears, Hemlock Jones, and Picklock Holes. The less-than-amused guardians of the Arthur Conan Doyle estate managed to get that Holmes anthology suppressed. Undeterred, editor Queen would publish many parodies and pastiches over the first forty years of this magazine and especially enjoyed those in which the target was Queen him/themselves. The title "The Misadventures of Ellery Queen" was first used on a survey article by Marvin Lachman in the August 1969 issue of *The Queen Canon Bibliophile,* a short-lived but significant fanzine edited by the Rev. Robert E. Washer, and later on a proposed anthology, an unrealized 1980s project of Josh Pachter.

In a parody, an author's style is imitated for comic effect. In a pastiche, the characters and backgrounds of another writer are used in serious imitation of the style. Since elements of homage and mockery often coexist, editor Queen sometimes called the stories parody-pastiches. A third category beloved of editor Queen was the indirect pastiche, in which the style and characters may be different but the source of influence is explicit.

The earliest EQ parody in *EQMM* kidded not Queen the author but Queen the editor. In the March 1947 issue, Baynard Kendrick's takeoff on true-crime articles, "The Case of the Stuttering Sextant," was introduced by Clayton Rawson (a former *True Detective* editor who would later be a managing editor of *EQMM*) in the style of a Queenian story note: "'Tec fans will greet this epoch-making masterpiece of murder with huzzas and dancing in the streets (white tie). *EQMM* fans will be tickled pink to learn the story has not previously appeared in any other language (including the Sanskrit). . . ."

As Lachman points out, most of the early parodies in *EQMM* were Sherlockian in nature, and while EQ the sleuth appears as a supporting player in some of them, the first writer to do a story starring a parody Ellery was Arthur Porges. Celery Green, an American sleuth traveling in Britain, assists Inspector Dewe East in two broadly comic stories, "The English Village Mystery" (December 1964) and "The Indian Diamond Mystery" (June 1965). The detective's given name allows him to stalk off at the end of each case.

I first broke into print in this magazine in the late '60s as a parody-

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pastiche specialist. After buying stories in imitation of Ed McBain, Burt L. Standish, and S.S. Van Dine, Fred Dannay asked if I would like to do a Queen parody, and I responded with my fourth published story, "The Lithuanian Eraser Mystery" (March 1969), a theatrical dying-message puzzler about E. Larry Cune, surely one of the more strained Queenian parody names. I would return to the character twice in *EQMM*—"The Swedish Boot Mystery" (November 1973) and "The Adventure of the Disoriented Detective" (September 1976)—and once in *The Queen Canon Bibliophile*—"The Idea Man" (August 1969)—always ringing changes on the old dying-message ploy.

In the April 1971 *Wilson Library Bulletin,* David Peele's "The Cataloging on the Wall" finds librarian Quellery Een in his office holding "his treasured first edition of the Viking Portable Mickey Spillane" and interviewing candidates to replace his deceased cataloger Slinki Porter. A Challenge to the Reader is included, and a library-school graduate might indeed figure out how he decided Elsie Dinsmore was the girl for the job. Funny stuff but likely to puzzle non-librarians.

One of the cleverest send-ups of the Queen style was also one of the least widely distributed, "The Persian Fez Mystery; or The Tragedy of Q" from Joe R. Christopher's 30-copy chapbook *Queen's Books Investigated; or, Queen Is in the Accounting House* (1983), wherein it is revealed that Elroy Queep "only in his novels . . . solved the cases before the police; in real life his suggestions were always wrong."

Pure pastiches of Ellery Queen have been relatively rare. The earliest may be one chapter of Marion Mainwaring's 1954 novel *Murder in Pastiche; or, Nine Detectives All at Sea.* Despite the use of assumed names for the various great detectives traveling on the same ocean liner, Mainwaring's imitations are generally straight-faced. Ellery, under the name Malory King, joins detectives based on Hercule Poirot, Sir John Appleby, Perry Mason, Roderick Alleyn, Nero Wolfe, Miss Silver, Mike Hammer, and Lord Peter Wimsey in addressing a shipboard mystery. The author is a splendid literary mimic, capturing the stylistic quirks of her various subjects. Many years later, she would apply this knack to the completion of a novel left unfinished by Edith Wharton, *The Buccaneers* (1993).

The stories Norma Schier wrote in imitation of famous detective-story writers were more pastiche than parody, but the names of the sleuths and the authors' names attached were anagrams of the originals. The stories would be collected under the title *The Anagram Detectives* (1979), one of the earliest products of Otto Penzler's Mysterious Press. EQ author and character became Leyne Requel in the story "Dying Message" (July 1966), a clever example of the titular gambit. All the other character names are anagrams as well, leading to such unusual handles as Carson Pellicot and Porter Oattes.

Despite the assumed name given the character, Dennis M. Dubin's "Elroy Quinn's Last Case" (July 1967), written when the author was a high-school senior, is also more pastiche than parody. The ageing

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sleuth is asked into a case with international implications by Inspector Thomas Velie, Jr. Since the name Velie is not changed and various authentic Queen titles appear as supposed Quinn titles, I wonder if it was at the request of editor Queen that Ellery's name was changed.

Francis M. Nevins's brilliant first story, "Open Letter to Survivors" (May 1972), begins with the following epigraph from Ellery Queen's *Ten Days' Wonder* (1948): " . . . there was the case of Adelina Monquieux, his remarkable solution of which cannot be revealed before 1972 by agreement with that curious lady's executors . . ." References to unrecorded cases, so common in the Sherlock Holmes canon, are rare in the Queen writings. Though the name Ellery Queen never appears in the text itself (his own idea, says Nevins, not Fred Dannay's), the identity of the author/sleuth is obvious, and the story has a stature among Queen pastiches comparable to Vincent Starrett's "The Unique Hamlet" among Holmes pastiches.

Ellery appears more or less under his own name in Julian Symons's *Great Detectives: Seven Original Investigations* (1981), in which Ellery (pince-nez in place) and his father are given a distinctly old-fashioned look in Tom Adams's illustrations. Taking a Sherlockian mock-scholarly approach, Symons opines that the Ellery of all the books after *Halfway House* (1936) was in fact a younger brother of the original, less pretentious but also less gifted. That younger brother, Dan Queen, solves a mid-twenties mystery as related by J. J. McCue, the family friend who introduced the early Queen novels. (Fred Dannay, to whom Symons sent the manuscript, admitted to being amused but offered no further comment.)

The September/October 1999 issue of this magazine, commemorating the seventieth anniversary of *The Roman Hat Mystery,* featured two new pastiches, both set in the present and both calling Ellery by his full name: Edward D. Hoch's "The Circle of Ink" (about Ellery the college guest lecturer) and my own "The Gilbert and Sullivan Clue" (about Ellery the Hollywood screenwriter).

Indirect pastiches, maybe more accurately termed homages, have been much more numerous. James Holding was the author of the earliest, longest, and most ambitious series of these, adopting the nationality/object pattern of the early Queen novels and featuring not a stand-in for Ellery himself but two men based on his creators, Fred Dannay and Manny Lee. King Danforth and Martin Leroy (collaborators under the name Leroy King), embarked on an around-the-world cruise with their wives, find a puzzle in every port. The series began with "The Norwegian Apple Mystery" (November 1960) and continued through "The African Fish Mystery" (April 1961), "The Italian Tile Mystery" (September 1961), "The Hong Kong Jewel Mystery" (November 1963), "The Zanzibar Shirt Mystery" (December 1963), "The Tahitian Powder Box Mystery" (October 1964), "The Japanese Card Mystery" (October 1965), "The New Zealand Bird Mystery" (January 1967), and "The Phillipine Key

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Mystery" (February 1968), reaching a total of ten entries with "The Borneo Snapshot Mystery" (January 1972).

Margaret Austin's "Introducing Ellery's Mom" (July 1962) actually recounts two cases (one respectable failure and one cleverly plotted success) narrated by the middle child of mystery writer and amateur sleuth Kate McKay. Young Ellery has older siblings named Nicholas Charles and Hildegarde and younger ones named Ngaio and Perry.

William Brittain, a prolific contributor of fair-play detective stories to *EQMM,* launched a new series in December 1965 with "The Man Who Read John Dickson Carr" and "The Man Who Read Ellery Queen." In the latter, the only possession 80-year-old Arthur Mindy brought to the Goodwill Senior Citizen Home was his collection of EQ novels, and he applies Queenian logic to the theft and concealment of another resident's gold coin. Editor Queen inserted the appropriate Challenge to the Reader. Brittain would subsequently produce stories about readers of Agatha Christie, John Creasey, G.K. Chesterton, Georges Simenon, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Isaac Asimov, in addition to his long series of puzzle stories about high-school science teacher Leonard Strang.

Josh Pachter came on the scene in the December 1968 issue with "E.Q. Griffen Earns His Name," written when he was 16, making him second only to James Yaffe in the ranks of youngest *EQMM* contributors. (Pachter's account of his first sale is entertaining: Told by his mother that Frederic Dannay was on the phone, he picked it up and said, "Dad, this isn't funny!") The character would return in "E.Q. Griffen's Second Case" (May 1970), written when Pachter was 17. Ellery Queen Griffen is one of eleven children of Inspector Ross Griffen, all of them named after famous fictional detectives. In his first case, he confronts two mysteries—he strikes out on the more trivial but solves the more serious, a robbery from a jewelry store, summarizing his conclusions very much in the EQ manner, in this case making a rather obvious solution sound more brilliant than it is. In his second and stronger outing, the victim is a hippie poet and children's-book writer who is stabbed in the back and scrawls a dying message on the sidewalk. The second story includes a reference to the young sleuth's Uncle James, an aspiring writer—an in-joke for serious Queen fans: James Griffen, along with Wilbur See, was one of the character names Dannay and Lee considered before settling on EQ. Subsequently, only one of the other Griffen children had a published case: "Sam Buried Caesar" (August 1971) about Nero Wolfe Griffen.

In the broad field of crime-mystery-detective-suspense-thriller fiction, Conan Doyle undoubtedly remains the most frequent object of parody and pastiche, distantly followed by Ian Fleming and Mickey Spillane, more distantly still by Raymond Chandler, Dorothy L. Sayers, S.S. Van Dine, and a few others. But Queen the author—and not entirely thanks to the enthusiasm of Queen the editor—surely must rank in the top ten. ●

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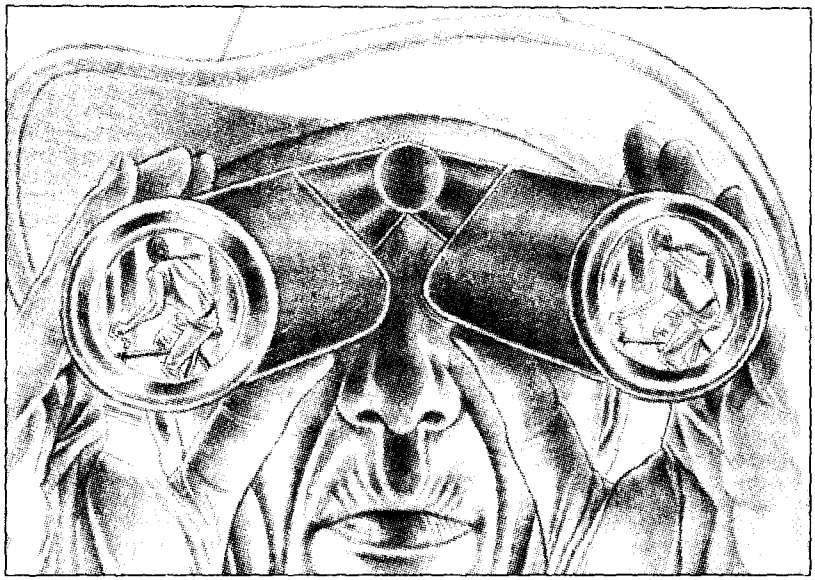

Art by Daniel Galanaugh

There Is No Crime on Easter Island

by Nancy Pickard

As the five-hour flight from Santiago came within sight of its destination, the man in the window seat said to Katharine Peters, "Have you ever been to Easter Island before?"

A little embarrassed, realizing she was practically leaning over him to look out, Katharine pulled back and said, "No. It's our first trip." With a gesture of her hand, she indicated that by "our" she was including her husband, on the other side of her, as well as the couple seated in front of them.

The man beside her pushed his seat back so that Katharine could see better.

Although they had sat beside each other for hours, they hadn't conversed, except to utter the usual courtesies of "Hello" and "Is my bag in your way?" and "Sorry to bother you, but I need to get into the aisle." He had slept or read for most of the trip, making conversation impossible anyway. Now Katharine heard more distinctly the Spanish accent she had noticed in his brief earlier words. When

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they boarded, she had seen him use a Chilean passport for his identification. He was a carmel-skinned man of late middle-age, tall enough to look even more cramped than most people would be in the small space allotted to him. Feeling sympathetic, Katharine had left him the armrest they shared, but now she leaned her elbow on it as she looked out the tiny window. She saw her own face in the glass, superimposed on the clouds: a red-haired woman in her worried forties, with a high, lined forehead and a long, thin nose.

The man pointed to the patch of land their plane was circling.

EQMM is proud to claim Nancy Pickard on its list of Department of First Stories authors. She went on from her debut to win Agatha, Anthony, Macavity, and Shamus awards for her short stories—plus a short story Edgar nomination. She has also won Agatha, Anthony, and Macavity awards for her novels, and was twice up for the Edgar in that category, too. Her latest novel is *The Truth Hurts*, and *The Virgin of Small Plains* is due in 2006 from Ballantine. ¶

"See the volcanos?" he asked her. "The big one at the top of the island is Terevaka. But the one you really want to climb is Rano Kau. That's where the quarry is. That's where all the famous statues were carved, right out of the rock walls of the crater. I always tell people, think of Mount Rushmore, only imagine if the sculptor had cut the presidents loose from the mountain and then set them up on platforms."

"It doesn't look like there's much there," Katharine said, meaning on the island.

"There isn't," he agreed with a slight smile, "except for history. Everybody lives in that one town you see down there, and except for the army base, the rest of the island is essentially one big public park."

It was a funny-looking island, Katharine thought; it was shaped like a soft triangle with the big volcano at the apex, smaller volcanos holding down the other corners, and a bottom edge that curved in and out, as if it were rippling. Its odd configuration brought to her mind a Halloween ghost costume—a small child with a sheet draped over him.

"I don't see any statues," she said, squinting.

"You will," the man told her, "when you get closer."

There was something about the way he said it, and perhaps combined with the impression she had of the island looking ghostlike, that gave Katharine a shudder of unease. To hide it, she said, "Are you visiting, too?"

It came out sounding stilted, overpolite.

"No." He took his time answering, as if the question had

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prompted him to think of something else. "I used to live in Santiago, but I retired here." He glanced at her. "You might not believe it, but at one time there may have been as many as thirty thousand people living down there. Now there are about a tenth that number, mostly Polynesians, and some Chileans, like me. At the worst of it, back around the late nineteenth century, there were barely a hundred people still alive on the whole island."

The man in front of them had turned around to listen in on their conversation. Katharine and Michael's friend, Lon Reynolds, was a big blond man with a receding hairline and a booming voice. Now, in a manner that suggested he already knew it all, he said: "They killed each other. They cut down all the trees and ruined the soil. They killed the birds and depleted their fisheries. There never had been much water, and they fought over that. Maybe there was also a climate change, or maybe not. But the formerly peaceful clans who had cooperated with each other for centuries got desperate. They turned on each other in a vicious civil war." He was using what Katharine's husband, Michael, called "Lon's lecturing voice." As was often the case, it was loud enough to attract attention, including that of Michael, who glanced over with an exasperated expression. Other passengers also looked over and listened to him. Lon noticed his extra audience and said, "At which point, the inhabitants began to eat the only protein they had left . . ."

Each other, Katharine knew Lon meant, and hoped he wouldn't say.

The man with the Spanish accent interrupted, but graciously. "You're right." His voice took on a dry edge, and his smile turned wry. "There's a taunt we still use on the island: *Your mother is stuck in my teeth. . . .*"

"Ew!" said a female voice in front of them.

Katharine smiled to hear her friend Nadia's predictable reaction to the cannibal joke. Lon's wife could be counted on to puncture her husband's more pompous moments.

". . . but it's also true," the Chilean man continued, in the same dry tone, "that the slave traders didn't help, nor did the smallpox they brought with them."

Michael Peters spoke up on the other side of Katharine. He was several inches shorter and about fifty pounds lighter than his friend Lon, but as he liked to joke, "At least I still have my hair." In fact, he had it in quantity and in length, and wore it tied back in a long, now-graying ponytail at the nape of his neck.

"Don't worry," Michael said with a laugh, "we're only bringing money."

The wry look in the Chilean's eyes deepened. "As deadly as any disease," he murmured, though Katharine was the only one who heard him, just as a recorded voice announced their final approach to landing.

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The four friends walked single file down the steps from the aircraft onto the runway at Mataveri airport. Slim, dark-haired Nadia Reynolds led the way, followed by her husband Lon, both in crisp, colorful designer resort attire, and then Katharine and Michael Peters, who looked more as if they'd plucked their jeans and T-shirts off the top of a laundry pile.

"This is it?" Nadia asked at the bottom. She stared around, looking and sounding disappointed. Two Polynesian men slowly pushed luggage carts toward the LAN CHILE Boeing 757 on which the friends had just flown in. Beyond the one-story terminal, the land was flat and brown, sparsely populated, rising to cliffs in the distance. "There's nobody here! This looks like the middle of nowhere."

"What did you expect, Nadia?" Lon was sarcastic. "O'Hare? LaGuardia? There are only two flights here a week." He held up a pair of fingers in front of her face. "Two. We're not in Chicago anymore. You do realize, Nadia," he lectured, "that we're two thousand miles from South America. Why do you think it took us five hours to get here? This is literally the most remote inhabited spot on earth."

"Well, yeah," Nadia said, "but I didn't know it would *feel* like it."

"Yes!" Michael Peters made a fist and pumped it triumphantly in the tropical air. "We did it! We have finally come to the ends of the earth!"

"My purse!" Katharine's face blanched and her eyes widened in panic. The foursome had picked up their luggage and were now walking toward the front doors leading onto the island proper. Because the island was a Chilean territory and they had come from Santiago, they hadn't even had to go through customs. Their arrival had been disarmingly casual. But now, Katharine frantically checked her other bags. "I've left my purse somewhere! It's got my passport, and our money . . ."

"Well, *that's* gone," Nadia said, "you'll never see *that* again."

"Michael, did I give it to you?" Katharine pleaded with her husband.

"No, I don't have it—" He looked stunned, then panicked.

"Come with me!" she begged all of them. "We have to find it!"

With Katharine running in the lead, the other three walked rapidly behind her toward the "*No Entrada*/Do Not Enter" sign on the door through which they had come only moments earlier. Before they could get there, however, Katharine's seatmate, the tall Chilean man, pushed it open. Seeing them rushing toward him, he smiled broadly and held up a large straw object for them to see.

"My purse!" Katharine exclaimed, running up to him. "Oh, thank you!"

"You left it on your seat," he told her kindly.

Michael shook the stranger's hand with as much vigor as if he'd

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saved their lives. "Thank you very much. *Muchas gracias.* I can't believe we got it back. I was sure it was long gone."

"On Easter Island?" The man's eyebrows rose. "Oh, no. There was no way you weren't going to get it back."

"Why not?" Nadia demanded.

He smiled at her. "Because there is no crime on Easter Island."

"Right," Nadia said, and laughed.

"No, really," he told her earnestly. "There isn't."

"You must have one hell of a police force," she said cynically.

"We don't have a police force."

"You're kidding," Lon Reynolds exclaimed, for once having been taken by surprise. "Why not?"

The tall man in the bright floral shirt and khaki trousers smiled again. "Because there is no crime on Easter Island."

His name, he told them, was Manuel Noriega. "Just like the former dictator of Panama," he said, flashing his charming smile. When he learned they had no hotel reservations—because they'd heard it wasn't necessary during low tourist season—he helped them select a *residencia* from among the several offered, in person, on the spot, in the airport—and then he hitched a ride with them in the *residencia*'s van.

"What's a *residencia?"* Nadia asked, mispronouncing it.

"Didn't you read any of those travel books I gave you?" Lon asked her, sounding annoyed.

"That's your job," she retorted.

Katharine, in the van's middle seat in front of them, turned around. "A *residencia* is a private home, Nadia. We'd probably call it a bed and breakfast."

"Oh, well, I love B and B's," Nadia said, sounding pleased.

"It's a good thing," her husband said sarcastically, "that the rest of us know what you like so we can always provide it."

"Yes," Nadia said, with a contented-cat grin that she directed to Katharine and Michael. "It is." But as she stared at the scenery passing by, her expression turned sour again. "You didn't do a very good job of it this time, though. Where are the beaches? Where's the shopping? What in the world are we supposed to *do* here? At least Machu Picchu was beautiful, and there were markets. And Egypt was fabulous, even with all those little kids constantly begging us for stuff all the time. And Stonehenge was okay, 'cause we could go back to London. But this place is like . . . nothing."

"Nadia!" her husband whispered in reproof. Lon cast a telling glance toward Noriega and the *residencia* owner who was driving the van. But in the seat between, Michael Peters burst out laughing. "What are we going to *do* here, Nadia? Gee, I dunno. What can there possibly be to do in a place with so much history and mystery?"

"I know, I know," she said grumpily. "Look at dumb ol'

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statues and stuff."

Her husband rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Dumb old statues," he muttered. "Dumb old statues!"

Katharine Peters, feeling embarrassed, glanced at the front seat to see if the driver and their helpful new friend were hearing and understanding what was being said in back. She was relieved when she thought she caught Manuel Noriega with a fleeting grin on his face. It was typical of Nadia Reynolds, Katharine thought, to be able to say even the most superficial, insulting, or outrageous things, and the very people she should have offended would only smile or laugh. It was, Katharine figured, a perk of beauty. Nadia always got away with things, and always would get away with things, because she was so pretty. Even now, Katharine saw Manuel Noriega glance in the rearview mirror at the beautiful, sulky, dark-haired woman in the backseat, and there was admiration in his eyes. But then his gaze shifted so that suddenly he was gazing directly into Katharine's eyes.

Quickly, she lowered hers, and turned to look at the scenery.

She hated to admit it, but Nadia was right: there wasn't much to see so far. Once, this island had been a thickly forested paradise; now, she didn't see a single tree, save for a few scraggly palms near the seashore. When people said the original inhabitants had cut down all the trees, apparently they really meant *all* the trees. The landscape that stretched up from the road on which they were traveling looked as spare and barren as a Midwestern prairie. Katharine shot a glance at their helpful stranger again, and was relieved to see that he was busy conversing with the driver, instead of paying attention to them. She wondered why anybody would choose to leave a country as lush and beautiful as mainland Chile, and a city as exciting as Santiago, and come to live on an island as haunted, plain, and isolated as this one, even if the ocean that surrounded it was lovely.

The two men up front stopped talking.

"What do you do here, Mr. Noriega?" Katharine blurted into the silence.

He propped his left arm on the seat back and turned around to answer her with his charming smile. "Manuel. Please call me Manuel. What do I do? I'm afraid I do what everybody else does on Easter Island, Señora Peters. I wait for the airplanes to deliver tourists. And then I offer my services as a guide around the island. If you want me to, I can show you the statues, the volcanos, the quarry, the caves . . ."

"No wonder you know so much," Nadia said.

"The caves!" Her husband leaned toward the front seat. "You can show us the caves?"

But Katharine thought, with a start: *He called me Señora Peters.* When they had all introduced themselves, in the terminal, they had given him only their first names, since there were four of them

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and only one of him. But he had just then called her by her last name. She looked around to see if any of the others had noticed—and found Nadia looking back at her, one eyebrow elevated.

Nadia leaned forward and whispered, "How does he know your name? You'd better check your purse, Katy."

When Katharine reached for her straw bag, Nadia provided cover by exclaiming, "What caves? I hate caves! You all know how claustrophobic I am. You didn't get me into the pyramids, and you're not getting me into any caves."

On the pretext of getting her sunglasses, Katharine examined her purse.

As far as she could tell, everything that was supposed to be there was there. Nothing seemed disturbed, including the personal mail she had brought with her on the trip, intending to find time to pay bills, among other things. She was slipping on her sunglasses just as Manuel turned around again and said, "Pyramids? Stonehenge, Machu Picchu? It sounds as if the four of you travel together a lot, and you go to—"

"The world's weirdest places," Nadia interrupted. "My husband just wants to be able to brag that he's been there, and Michael always thinks he's going to have some mystical experience, and Katy likes the scenery, and I—"

"Yes," Michael broke in, with a grin. "Why do you come with us, Nadia?"

"And I," she repeated, emphasizing the pronoun, "come because I can't talk them into going someplace easy, like Florida, and I don't want them to leave me home alone." She gave them all a half-serious, half-angry stare. "But that does *not* mean you're getting me into any cave."

When they alighted from the van, in the driveway of the sprawling house where they were going to rent rooms, Katy whispered to Nadia, "It's okay. Nothing's missing. I feel bad for being suspicious. He's been so nice to us—"

"Maybe too nice?" Nadia's tone was cynical again. "Maybe he just knows how to glom onto rich tourists when he sees us."

"Rich?" Katharine's grin was rueful. "Speak for yourself."

She immediately regretted saying it, because Nadia grasped her wrist and gave it a sympathetic squeeze. "Listen, if you ever need anything . . ."

She left the rest unsaid, but it was all there in the warmth of her eyes.

Katharine felt her face get hot. She shook her head. She felt touched, but also mortified. It was hard to be getting broker instead of getting better off in life. They all knew—though so far not even Lon had said it out loud—that this was probably their last exotic trip together, because it was the last one that the Peterses could pretend to afford, and even this was stretching an

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already-strained budget to its breaking point.

"We're fine," Katharine assured her friend.

Nadia's gaze was steady and sceptical, but she didn't say anything more.

Before they could go to the caves, their new acquaintance and newly hired guide insisted they see the most famous lineup of *moai* on the island: fifteen upright statues of varying heights, all in a single line with their distinctive sway backs to the sea, and one fallen *moai* lying with its face to the sky.

"They represent chiefs," Manuel explained, "and members of ruling families."

"How *did* they move such huge statues?" Katharine asked him.

Lon laughed. "Mike, here, thinks it was aliens."

Michael shot him an unfriendly look. "I'm not an idiot."

Manuel grinned at him. "Don't worry. If you did think that, you'd have lots of company. And then there are the people who swear that the statues got up and walked here by themselves, by magic. But the most likely explanation is also the explanation for the disappearance of the trees. They used ropes and logs to pull and roll the statues. As they built more and more statues, they needed more and more rope and logs from the trees. Add that to a growing population who needed ever more firewood, harpoons, and boats, and something had to give."

Lon took over the lecture. "Then, when things finally did fall apart on the island, the warriors ran around knocking over each other's statues, until there wasn't a single one standing. These have all been re-erected, right, Manny?"

Their guide overlooked the familiarity and simply nodded.

"Why did they make them to begin with?" Michael asked, turning pointedly to Manuel.

"Competition," Lon said loudly. "Just like guys building skyscrapers today. Only back then, it was the one with the biggest statue wins."

"How many are there?" Michael inquired, and even more pointedly added, *"Manuel?"*

"How many statues, you mean?" Again, it was Lon who answered. "Hundreds. Maybe eight hundred, all together."

Michael's mouth dropped open, though he still didn't acknowledge that it was Lon who'd been speaking. "And they knocked them *all* down?"

"Yes," Manuel said, but Lon said, "Every damn one of them," at the same time, and drowned him out.

"You'd think," Nadia said, "that the statues would be facing out to sea."

"They all face inland," Lon informed her. "No one really knows why."

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"I think I do," Katharine said, and when the others looked over at her, she blushed. "Well, I mean, I don't really know why they did it, but I know why I'd do it this way." Her voice grew quiet, seeming to compel their attention, so that even Lon didn't interrupt her as she said, "If I lived here in the middle of nowhere, where there was never anything on the horizon and ships never arrived from anywhere, I'd line the whole island with statues and turn them to face me, so it wouldn't feel so lonely. . . ."

The wind picked up at that moment, whistling around the statues and the living humans who had turned to stare at them.

The next morning, they traveled to the caves.

"Aren't you coming in with us, Manny?"

Lon stopped at the wide mouth of the first cave and called back to their guide. But Manuel shook his head. "No. You'll be fine going in alone."

He had arrived at their guesthouse to pick them up in a four-wheel-drive vehicle loaded with bottled water and snacks, because there was nowhere on the island to buy supplies outside of town.

"Why won't you go in the cave?" Nadia wanted to know. "Scared?"

He smiled at her. "No, just traditional . . . and cautious."

"Cautious?" Michael looked suddenly sceptical of the excursion. "What's there to be cautious about for you, but not for us?"

Manuel explained, "There's a taboo against going into these caves."

"Well, then, why are *they* going?" Nadia demanded of him.

"It's only those of us who live on the island who observe the taboo," he explained. "Visitors don't have to."

"Why not?" Katharine asked him.

He looked straight at her. "Because you'll be leaving soon."

There was a moment's silence while they took in the implication of that, and then they all laughed nervously. "You mean," Lon said, "we'll be okay just so long as we don't stick around long enough for the taboo to get us?"

Their guide smiled in a way that got across the idea that he knew what he was saying was anachronistic and amusing, but that he was sticking to it anyway. "More or less. Yes."

Nadia stepped close to her husband, looked up into his face, and said: "Boo!"

That broke up the tension and made them laugh.

"Go ahead," Manuel urged them. "I think you'll find it surprising."

"Does this cave have a name?" Lon wanted to know before he stepped into it.

"It's called the Cave of the Virgins," Manuel answered.

"Cave of the Virgins?" Nadia laughed. "Obviously, *I've* got no business going in there. You'd better watch it, Katy, or it'll spit you out, too."

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Fifteen minutes later, when Katharine stumbled out of the cave looking pale and ill, Nadia glanced up in surprise and said, "Hey, I didn't think it would really happen!" When Katharine put out a hand to support herself on the exterior cave wall, and then bent over at the waist as if she was going to vomit, Nadia sprang to her feet.

"What's the matter, Katy?"

Katharine waved for her to sit back down. "Dizzy." After a moment, she straightened back up and then looked over to where Nadia was once again seated on the grass with Manuel. "There are human skulls in there."

"Skulls!"

Manuel smiled apologetically. "I warned you to expect surprises."

"You could have warned her to expect skulls!"

He shrugged. "I never know whether to tell people ahead of time. If I don't tell them, it may upset them . . . like you, Señora. But most of the time they get a thrill out of it, and they kind of enjoy the shock."

"Katharine doesn't look as if she liked the shock."

Katharine walked over toward them on unsteady legs. "There were two of them, Nadia. Just . . . heads . . . and there may have been a few other bones—"

"Yes," Manuel said, "there are."

"It was just—" Katharine sat down near them. "Scary. Grotesque."

"And the boys loved it, I'll bet," her friend said.

"Of course. They're still in there, looking for more bones."

Manuel had warned them earlier not to touch or disturb any artifacts on the island.

"I'll have to remember to show them the finger bone," he murmured now.

"Finger bone?" Katharine asked weakly. He nodded. "A finger bone was found beneath one of the statues that were knocked over all those years ago. Somebody must not have moved fast enough to get out of the way."

"Gross," Nadia said.

Katharine shuddered. "It's no wonder there's no crime here."

Their guide looked surprised. "Why do you say that?"

She looked at him with eyes that still registered the shock she'd felt at seeing human skulls inside the cave.

"Because there has already been enough crime on this island to last forever."

Two hours later, Katharine and Manuel stood on a slight rise, just inside a dormant volcano, watching Nadia and Lon snipe at each other. The married couple were standing in front of a partially

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completed statue that towered over them. All around them lay the remains of the single basalt quarry where all the sculpting work had been achieved. Workmen from ancient days appeared to have dropped their tools and walked off the job, leaving behind them tools on the ground and several hundred statues in various stages of completion.

"These are the ugliest statues I've ever seen," Nadia said, starting it.

"How can you call them ugly?" Lon shot back. "Nadia, these are the most famous statues in the world."

"Well, Mick Jagger is famous, too, but that doesn't make him pretty."

"My God, Nadia, do you have to judge everything by modern standards?"

"Do I look like a first-century art critic, Lon?" she retorted, and then she waved a dismissive hand at all the statues and pieces of statues around her. "I've seen garden gnomes that looked better than these things."

Standing beside Katharine, several yards away, Manuel said quietly, "Why does she do that?"

Katharine glanced at him. "Why does she act like an idiot, you mean? To annoy Lon, I think. He can be a little full of himself . . ." She smiled apologetically. " . . . as you may have noticed. He didn't used to be so obnoxious. When we first knew him, he was lots of fun."

"What happened?"

She shrugged. "Money. Success. Security. But Nadia's not really an idiot, you know."

"I know," the guide said, and then he added, when he saw she looked surprised, "I had a chance to talk to her alone when the rest of you were in the cave. Even in that short time, I could tell that she is quite intelligent. And that it isn't true that she hadn't read a lot before coming here. She was telling me things about it before I could even tell her."

"Yeah, she always does that. We go on these trips and she pretends to be a twit, and she really knows more than the rest of us do. She holds a very high-powered job in a huge insurance corporation," Katharine told him. "So does Lon, that's how they met. But when she says that all she really wants to do on vacation is veg in the sun, she means it."

"Does she ever get to do that?"

"Does she ever get her way, you mean? Not very often."

"Which is why she does this to annoy him," Manuel observed.

"Exactly."

He turned to her. "And what do you and your husband do when you're not traveling to mystical places?" He smiled at her, which dragged a smile out of her, too. "I've got to say the two of you don't exactly strike me as corporate types, but maybe that's only

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because you're on vacation."

"No," she said. "We're not like that. Michael's an artist. I'm a freelance writer."

Manuel looked as if he was about to follow up that piece of information with a question, but then he closed his mouth again, as if he had decided that whatever he was going to ask might be tactless.

She said it for him: "How can we afford this, you're wondering? Since artists and writers usually don't make much money?" A little grimly, Katharine patted the straw purse that hung over her shoulder, the purse where the unopened bills still lay. "Funny thing, but I've been asking myself the same question lately."

"Then why—?"

"Do we keep coming? Because Michael and Lon have been friends since they were in college. They've always egged each other on." Her expression turned a little bitter. "And now, even though the price of eggs has gotten way too high, we just keep buying them." She broke off and laughed, sounding embarrassed. "I'm sorry. That was even dumber than Nadia makes herself sound. I'd better go look at those 'ugly old statues' that I keep hearing so much about."

She started to move away from him, but he stopped her by asking, "Was it really the skulls that made you sick this morning?"

Katharine turned to look up at him. "No." She looked distressed again. "The men were being ugly to each other. Lon was bragging about how well he's doing, and Michael was giving him a hard time. I hate it. It upsets me."

She turned away, and hurried off to see the statues that many people considered to be one of the wonders of the world.

Off in a corner of the quarry, Nadia pulled Katharine aside and said, "I asked Manuel what he did for a living in Chile, before he came here, but he wouldn't tell me."

"Wouldn't tell you? What do you mean?"

"I mean he fudged. He said, 'Oh, this and that, one thing and another.'" Nadia had the suspicious look in her eyes again. "So I said, what does that mean, and he said, 'It was a long time ago.'"

"Well, he doesn't *have* to tell us anything."

"No, but I like to know who I'm hiring."

Katharine grinned. "Next time we hire a guide, we'll make him submit a résumé to your personnel department."

Nadia laughed at that. "Damn right. But really, Katy, we should watch him. He could be a crook, he could steal us blind. Hang on to your purse, girl."

"He already had a chance at my purse," Katharine reminded her, and then couldn't help but tease. "You're the one who'd better be careful with her purse. It would be much better pickings."

Unfortunately, it came out sounding harsh and bitter, which she hadn't intended.

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When Katharine saw her friend's eyes widen in surprise and what looked like hurt, she rushed to say, "I didn't mean that the way it sounded, truly."

Before Nadia could respond, their husbands came hurrying up to them. Lon threw an arm around Nadia's shoulders and then pointed to the top of the crater with his free hand. "I want to hike around the rim of this volcano tomorrow. Who's coming with me?"

Under his arm, his wife shuddered. "Not me, not heights."

"How high is it?" Michael inquired of Manuel.

"On the other side, there's a four-hundred-foot sheer drop to the ocean. It's spectacular, but it's not recommended for anybody except the most experienced climbers."

Michael looked disappointed. "That lets me out."

"Oh, come on," Lon scoffed at him. "You never know, you might have one of your mystical epiphanies up there."

"I've already had my epiphany for this trip," Michael said in a tight voice.

"Oh yeah, and what was it?"

"I had a revelation that you're a jerk, Lon."

Nadia laughed, relieving some of the tension. "Well, *that's* not news!"

"I don't care if nobody goes with me," Lon said aggressively. "I'll hike it by myself."

But their guide stared across at him with a serious expression. "I wish you wouldn't, Señor Reynolds. It's the most dangerous hike on the island. If you do it, you should definitely have a partner."

Lon looked at his three mates, and when none of them volunteered, he shrugged.

"No problem," he said, with a definite bite to his words, "I'll just do it the next time we come to Easter Island." It was clear to all of them that what he really meant was, *We'll never be back here again. Thanks a lot for spoiling my fun.*

It seemed that Lon still hadn't gotten over it by the time the friends went to dinner that night. The restaurant they chose, at Manuel's suggestion, was basically just tables and chairs set on top of a concrete slab painted green, with a thatched roof overhead. Even the kitchen was open-air, so they could watch the chef broiling their shrimp and boiling the pasta.

Lon's words grew more snappish with every refill of his glass of wine.

Over salad, he seemed merely baffled and annoyed, saying, "I don't know what's the matter with you pansies. It doesn't look like such a difficult hike to me. Hell, we've walked all over England together—"

"Yeah, over grass and gentle hills," Michael reminded him.

"We've walked in the desert—"

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"Which is, you may recall, *flat,*" Nadia said, which made the others laugh.

Her husband's face flushed. He took a swig from his wineglass, and did not join their laughter. "I just think it would be a highlight of our lives to be up there on that ridge as the sun comes up tomorrow. We could leave the *residencia* while it's still dark, and be on top in time for the sunrise—"

"Oh, even smarter," his wife said. "You want to hike up there in the *dark.*"

"Don't make such a big deal out of everything, Nadia." Lon's eyes were hot with anger. "The only reason Manuel warned us away was to keep from getting sued if one of us did fall, which is not going to happen."

"Ha! And why would I sue *him,* if *you* act like a fool and break your neck?"

Lon's face flushed an even deeper red. "Hell, we've only *got* tomorrow, and then we're gone, and we'll never be back again. I'm telling you, you'll regret it if you don't go with me."

Katharine looked alarmed. "You're still going, Lon?"

"I might," he said aggressively.

"I can't *believe* you!" Nadia picked up her napkin from her lap and threw it at him.

He glared at her. "It's my neck."

"And a shame there's no brain on top of it!"

By the time they finished the appetizers, he had come back to the subject, only by then he'd had more wine and his tongue was even looser. "Maybe I'll hire Manuel to go with me." He nodded his head in the direction of a long bar where their guide sat on a stool, in conversation with the Polynesian bartender. Lon glared at Michael across the table. "Just because you can't afford him, doesn't mean I shouldn't get to go."

Nadia darted a glance at him, and Katharine gasped a little.

"We can afford it, Lon," she told him.

"Really? Then why did you need me to pay for all of us today?"

Katharine looked bewildered. "We didn't—"

Michael put a hand on top of hers. "I told him we'd pay him back—"

"Out of what?" Lon sneered. "It's finally coming home to roost, isn't it? After all these years, we're finally seeing who has been the smart one, after all. For so many years, ever since we graduated from college, you've mocked me for being a corporate guy. You and your free spirit, right? Never going to be tied down, always just delighted to go to your own work every day, never reporting to any boss . . ."

"Where did this come from?" Michael said, looking stunned.

"Where did it come from? It came from all these years of you being so smug about being a stupid artist . . . " He glanced at Katharine.

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" . . . and writer. Like either of you is ever going to have any real success! You draw the equivalent of box tops, for God's sake." Again he glanced at Katharine. "And you, you write ad copy for chewing gum. Yeah, there's so much integrity in that, right? You're both such *artists.* And now, guess what? After thirty years of actually getting out of bed and going to work every day, after working our tails off and earning every penny, Nadia and I get to retire with several million bucks apiece. And what do you get to retire on, Michael? Katharine? Oh, that's right, you don't ever get to retire, do you? You'll still be drawing your stupid box tops when you're eighty years old. Katharine will still be trying to find ad copy to write when you're both senile and she can't string two words together. . . ."

"Lon, stop it!" Nadia tried to take one of his hands, but he jerked out of her grasp.

"Nadia and I will still be taking any trips we want to take," he plunged on, ignoring her. "And what will you be doing, Michael? You'll be walking from one end of the hall in the Medicaid nursing home to the other end of the hall . . ."

Katharine pushed her chair back and stood up.

Michael shook his head, as if to clear it, and then he stood up, too. In a voice that trembled with emotion, he stared across the table at his best friend and said, "Go on up on that ridge, Lon. Take all the chances you want, buddy. You want to take a hike, Lon? Fine! Take a hike, buddy. Take a long walk off a short ridge. Go see your sunset. I hope it's the last one you ever get to *buy.*"

He put an arm around his wife and pushed her ahead of him.

They were gone by the time the entrées were placed on the table. At the far end of the bar, Manuel Noriega exchanged glances with the bartender. Lon's voice had easily carried over to them. The bartender, a Polynesian, smiled slightly, as if to say, "Tourists!" Manuel shook his head, as if in agreement, but he paid for his drinks soon after that and left without ordering dinner.

Manuel found Katharine Peters sitting alone on a side patio of the *residencia.*

"Is everything all right, Señora?"

When she looked up at him, her face was in shadow so he couldn't see her expression clearly, but there was unhappiness in her voice. "Some things never change, do they?"

"What do you mean?" he asked her.

"From one century to the next, we pretty much behave just the same. Everybody gets along fine, and then before you know it, we're knocking each other down. Did we make fools of ourselves back in the restaurant, Manuel?"

His face was shadowed, too, so she couldn't see his smile. "Not all of you."

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When she didn't respond, he turned quietly and walked away.

The noise of a car engine woke Katharine up with a start that set her heart pounding. Instinctively, she turned toward the other side of the bed to touch Michael, but when she put her hand where his chest should be, he wasn't there.

Katharine turned on a lamp on her side of the bed. Their travel clock said: 4:00 A.M. Her husband's side of the bed was empty, the sheets pulled back.

She got up and turned on more lights. They revealed that the clothes he had taken off to come to bed were gone. It appeared to her that some time after she fell asleep, Michael had slipped out of bed, gotten dressed again, and then left their room without waking her, or telling her where he was going.

Katharine looked around for a note from him, but didn't find one.

She opened the door and looked out into the darkness of the backyard of the guesthouse. Michael wasn't on the back porch. After she had walked all around the house in her nightgown, she knew he wasn't on any of the patios, either. She saw that the big van was not in the driveway, and one of the bicycles the home kept for its guests was gone as well.

There is no crime on Easter Island . . .

Katharine decided to believe that, and to believe that Michael had gone out—safely—for a walk along the safe, deserted streets of the town. Maybe he had indigestion, either from some of the food they'd had that day, or from the things that Lon had said to them.

She went back to bed, but didn't get back to sleep.

Shortly after dawn, the door to the room quietly opened.

Katharine shut her eyes.

She heard someone come in and slip off clothing. Then the bed covers next to her stirred and her husband lay down beside her. She realized that if the sound of the van's engine had not awakened her, she would never have known that he had come and gone.

"Where have you been, Michael?"

She could feel how startled he was to hear her voice.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

"Where'd you go?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I went for a walk."

Usually, Katharine could tell the minute he dropped off to sleep, because Michael snored. But although she lay with her eyes open for another hour, she never heard him make a sound until the sun was high enough to stream in through the windows.

At breakfast in the *residencia*'s dining room, Nadia told them that Lon had taken the van out during the night in order to drive himself back to the volcano.

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"I couldn't stop him."

She sounded more angry than worried, even though she said he had left at four in the morning, and it was by then already eight A.M.

Katharine didn't want to ask the obvious: *Shouldn't he be back by now?*

When Lon Reynolds still had not returned with the van by ten, and the owner of the *residencia* needed it to make an airport run, he called his friend Manuel Noriega for assistance. "Can you drive out there and look for him?" he asked. "And if you find him, tell him to bring my van back as soon as possible."

By eleven A.M., when neither Manuel nor Lon had appeared, Nadia was frantic.

"I'd call the police," she said, "if this godforsaken island had any!"

Upon hearing that, Katharine Peters burst into tears.

Ten minutes later, Lon Reynolds drove up to the guesthouse in the van, got out, and walked casually over to the frightened little band of people on the back porch.

"You all look as if you've just seen a ghost," he said. And then, "You missed a hell of a show. I walked the entire rim of that crater and saw the most spectacular sunrise I'll ever see in my life."

"Where have you *been?*" his wife screamed at him.

He looked at her as if she had lost her marbles, and shrugged. "Since I already had the van, I drove all the way around the island to see the rest of it. Why? Is there a problem?"

Manuel Noriega stood at the airport fence watching the LAN CHILE jet take off for Santiago, taking "his" tourists with it. There was a fresh check for $1,000 in his pocket, to match the one he had taken from Katharine Peters's handbag when she had "accidentally" left it behind in the airplane on the day of their arrival. She was a nice, caring, efficient woman, he thought. When he had gone up to the LAN CHILE ticket counter at the airport in Santiago, his prepaid ticket to Easter Island was there for him, just as she had e-mailed that it would be.

They had conducted their business entirely by e-mail.

She had been looking for a private investigator.

He wasn't that, but he had been a cop.

A friend passed his name along to the American woman who was privately looking for a bodyguard. "I would like you to keep a close watch on our friend Lon Reynolds," were her e-mail instructions. "Don't let anything happen to him."

She had not told him what that "anything" might be.

Maybe she had not even known for sure, herself, exactly what the danger might be, but he was pretty sure that she feared it might come from her own husband, if he was pushed too far.

Easter Island was a land of extremes, Manuel believed, a land

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at the end of the earth, a place where nothing ever happened and even if it did, there was nothing to be done about it afterwards. When he had watched the acrimony grow between the two old friends, he had believed he was witnessing the possibility that something very bad, something irrevocable was about to happen.

Lon Reynolds was an obnoxious, stubborn man.

Michael Peters was a defeated, humiliated one.

After their argument in the restaurant, Manuel had driven out to the volcano, parked his car where no one could see it, and then he had hiked up to the rim to wait. The first of them to arrive had been Michael Peters, bicycling quietly up the dirt roads, and also hiking up to wait. But when he arrived at the top of the precipitous ridge he had found not his old friend Lon but their "guide," Manuel.

They had stared at each other, the two men from different cultures.

No words had been exchanged until Michael had said, "So you're going to walk with him, to make sure he doesn't fall off."

"Yes."

"Then I'll go back. There's no reason for me to be here, then."

The words could have meant anything. They hung in the tropical air.

Michael Peters turned, and carefully made his way back down, vanishing into the darkness for a while. When the headlights of the van appeared, and that door opened and then slammed, it was only by looking through binoculars that Manuel was able to see Michael take the bicycle out of hiding, get on it, and peddle away unobserved by his friend.

"You're here!" were Lon's first words when he reached the top.

"I thought it safer this way," Manuel told him. "I won't charge you."

"That's good," Lon said ungraciously, "since I never asked you to do this."

I won't charge you for saving your life, Manuel thought, as he led the way along the ridge above the sea, *because I've already been paid.* Lon Reynolds would never know that Katharine had used money she couldn't afford to spend in order to keep two old friends from destroying each other like primitive men in a battle for supremacy. Manuel wondered if Michael really would have pushed his old friend off the cliff, like one of the ancient islanders shoving a statue down. And he wondered what would happen to all of them when they returned home. Maybe this strange, charged episode between them would defuse things, maybe they would safely drift apart. There was only one thing Manuel knew for sure as the jet shrank to a dot in the sky and he turned around to leave the airport: Thanks to himself and to Katharine Peters, there was no crime on Easter Island. ●

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Dead at the Scene

by John H. Dirckx

Gavin Hoopes's mood was bleak as he gunned his semi along the exit lane from the truck scales and back into the stream of traffic on the westbound Interstate. The mandatory stop at the weigh station had put him about twenty minutes behind —twenty minutes closer to rush hour, when the volume of local traffic would increase from aggravating to downright unbearable. It was the middle of July, the height of the tourist season, and it was the time of day when, if you're going west, the sun starts to fry your eyeballs right through your sunglasses.

Formerly a doctor at the University of Dayton, John H. Dirckx is now retired and free to produce more of his excellent short tales featuring African-American police detective Cyrus Auburn. This time Auburn investigates what appears to be a simple case of death in a traffic accident. But it soon emerges that someone has found a most ingenious method for murder. If you like your mysteries in the classical mold, you'll enjoy this.

As if all that wasn't enough, he had just caught sight, from his vantage point ten feet above the pavement, of an oblong orange sign at the crest of the next rise. Even before he could make out the lettering, he correctly divined its message: ROAD CONSTRUCTION 2 MILES.

By the time he'd traveled those two miles, further signs had imparted more explicit warnings and directions: *Left lane closed ahead. All traffic jog right. Trucks must use right shoulder. Speed limit 40 MPH. Fines doubled in construction area. No lane changing.*

Already the traffic had begun to thicken up like pea soup in a funnel. Hoopes's right foot danced back and forth constantly between the brake and the gas pedal as he jockeyed his heavy rig into the ever-slowing shoulder lane. The roar of the engine and the hiss of the air brakes drowned his yelp of profanity as a motorcyclist veered right in front of him out of nowhere just before the extreme left lane evaporated.

That was all he needed—having to eat the dust kicked up by a

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roller skate while he crawled along as part of this funeral procession.

During the last hour of the shift, Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn liked to relax at his desk, finishing up the day's paperwork and pretending to be busier than he was. The mellow mood of dying day took on a subtle spice of excitement from the possibility that something might still break before he made it to his car out in the parking lot, and then the game would go into overtime.

At 4:39 P.M. Friday by the clock on the courthouse, Lieutenant Savage appeared in the doorway of Auburn's office holding a strip of adding-machine paper, which was what he used to take notes at the phone. Auburn sighed inaudibly and cinched up the knot of his tie.

"We need to move fast on this, Cy. Dollinger's waiting for you at the side door. Kestrel's going along in the cruiser because there probably won't be anywhere down there for him to park his van."

"Down where?"

"The construction site on the westbound lanes of the Interstate, just east of the Sixth Street exit. A semi rear-ended a motorcycle and the driver of the motorcycle is dead at the scene. I know what you're going to say, so don't say it. This isn't just any road kill. Stamaty's on the spot, and he says there are bullet holes in the motorcycle's windshield."

"Any holes in the driver?"

"None he could see, but it's not exactly the place to start the autopsy."

"ID on the dead guy? Or is it a gal?"

"A Roger Mulreedy."

"Local?"

"The side door, Cy. Stamaty says the traffic's already backed up half a mile."

Patrolman Fritz Dollinger was at the wheel of the cruiser and Sergeant Kestrel, the evidence technician, sat in the caged-in backseat holding his field kit on his lap like a crate of eggs. Once they were under way, Records radioed preliminary background information on the victim: age 37, married, no children, employed by a local heating and cooling contractor, no police record.

The scene of the accident, already badly congested by road-construction activities, was now a seething maelstrom of crawling, lurching, honking cars and trucks. Instead of joining the endless string of vehicles snaking past the spot from behind, Dollinger put on his siren and lights and turned the Sixth Street exit ramp into an access ramp by driving down the shoulder against the flow of traffic.

The downtown stretch of the Interstate passed through a verita-

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ble canyon formed by vertical concrete walls varying in height from ten to twenty-five feet. For the past three weeks, the two westbound lanes closest to the grassed median had been shut down for repairs. One of the lost lanes had been regained by diverting slow-lane traffic onto the right shoulder.

A semitrailer truck now stood immobile, its cab in the shoulder lane less than a yard from the concrete retaining wall and its fifty-three-foot trailer slued across the lane next to it, reducing the flow of traffic at that point to a single lane. Patrolman Johnny Myers was struggling valiantly to keep the traffic moving through the one clear lane.

The afternoon heat radiated from the pavement and the retaining wall in waves, and the air was poisonous with the exhaust of an endless stream of idling cars and geared-down trucks. Beyond a straggling colonnade of orange plastic barrels, workers in hard hats sweated in the closed lanes, and pieces of heavy equipment maneuvered awkwardly around each other in the narrow median. The earsplitting chatter of jackhammers, the hiss of compressed air, and the growl of bulldozers reverberated from the concrete surfaces, forming a background to the unceasing chirp of Myers's whistle. Dollinger parked his cruiser on the shoulder, head-to-head with Myers's cruiser.

In imminent peril from motorists gunning up to speed after passing the narrow point, Auburn and the others got out and squeezed in single file between the truck cab and the wall.

Nick Stamaty, the investigator from the coroner's office, was squatting next to a body in the narrow wedge-shaped space between the truck trailer and the wall. Ten yards further along the wall, a motorcycle lay on its side. Beyond that they could see an ambulance with lights flashing. Patrolman Bystrom, who had been with Myers in the cruiser when they responded to the call, was talking to the ambulance crew. Although their services were obviously not needed, the crew were more or less trapped at the scene because Stamaty's van had their ambulance blocked.

The bed of the trailer was so high that passengers in the cars snaking by could look under it and see Roger Mulreedy's battered remains. He hadn't been wearing a helmet, but it wouldn't have made much difference if he had. Evidently he and his cycle had been bounced or raked along the retaining wall by the right front fender of the semi. Parts of him looked like illustrations in an anatomy atlas.

Stamaty acknowledged the arrival of the investigators from Public Safety with a genial nod, as if they'd just casually met on the steps of the courthouse. "Look but don't touch, guys," he said. "This red stuff you see all around here isn't transmission fluid."

In a rubber-gloved hand he held up the driver's license he'd

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found on the body. The photograph matched the face, more or less. Kestrel had already put down his field kit and unstrapped his camera.

"Where's the truckdriver?" Auburn asked Stamaty.

"Up in his cab, lying across the seat. Bystrom has his license."

"Let's see these bullet holes."

"They're not holes, Cy, and they may not have been made by bullets. But in the circumstances . . . Come on over and take a look."

The motorcycle was a lightweight Japanese sport model. Although few of its aluminum and fiberglass parts now retained the shape they'd had when they left the factory, the low-slung, wraparound windscreen had escaped shattering. Stamaty didn't need to point out the four starred pockmarks in the high-impact plastic. As Auburn crouched on the gritty pavement to get a better view, he sensed Kestrel's hand hovering in the direction of his right arm, ready to intervene immediately should he so far forget himself as to touch the cycle before it had been duly photographed.

"Must have been pretty low-velocity projectiles," said Auburn. "Maybe from a BB gun. Whatever they were, they were four of a kind. Each of these marks looks exactly like the other three. Otherwise I'd say maybe it was some chips kicked up by a jackhammer, or gravel flying off something traveling in front of him. No bullet wounds on him?"

"Hard to be sure, the shape he's in. I couldn't find any holes in his shirt or his pants. And I didn't see anything that looked like bullet marks anywhere else on the cycle."

Somewhere a clock was striking five.

Patrolman Fritz Dollinger hauled his ponderous frame erect after examining the motorcycle. "Those marks don't look all that fresh to me," he said. "Could have been there a long time. Could be the outer edge of a shotgun burst."

Bystrom had joined the group. "The trucker said the biker lost control suddenly and flipped over, and he couldn't stop in time to keep from hitting him."

"If somebody did shoot him out of the saddle," remarked Stamaty, "they could have been up there on the Sixth Street overpass. Maybe some crazy kid with a slingshot or a wrist rocket."

"Pretty fast reloading for a slingshot," said Kestrel, who had seldom been known to agree with Stamaty about anything.

"It could have been a pellet gun," said Bystrom. "Maybe somebody that didn't like bikers—or anyway this particular biker."

"Let's not impanel the jury till we talk to the truckdriver," said Auburn. "He was here when it happened, and we weren't."

Stamaty had photographed the scene before they arrived, but they had to wait while Kestrel took pictures of the motorcycle

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(seemingly from most of the thirty-two compass points) before they unlocked its cargo compartment with the key on Mulreedy's ring. A careful search turned up no alcohol, drugs, or firearms. They did find tools, a mostly empty lunchbox, and papers pertaining to the heating and cooling business that Mulreedy worked for.

Auburn strongly doubted that the marks on the windshield had anything to do with Mulreedy's death. At this point he thought it likely the truck driver would be charged with vehicular homicide. He got the keys to the cruiser from Dollinger, locked the contents of the cycle's cargo compartment and a plastic bag containing the articles from the victim's pockets in the trunk, and came back with forms on a clipboard.

Before approaching the truckdriver, he walked back between the wall and the trailer to get more information from Bystrom. Myers's whistle still shrieked with unflagging vigor as he waved the traffic past the narrow spot, first blending two lanes into one. The thudding of a traffic helicopter hovering directly overhead was now added to the symphony of noise surrounding the scene.

Bystrom and Myers had arrived less than five minutes after Hoopes, the truckdriver, had radioed a report of the accident to the State Highway Patrol on Channel 9. Because of the location within the city limits, the Highway Patrol dispatcher had routed the call to Public Safety, and the cruiser had been just three blocks from the scene. The ambulance crew from the downtown Fire and Rescue station had arrived within a minute after them. They had found Mulreedy obviously beyond help and Hoopes in a state of mild hysteria.

"Did you walk him?"

"Are you kidding? In this circus?" Bystrom's father was a retired fire captain, and he'd known Cyrus Auburn since he was eight.

"Somebody better do it."

"He's all yours. Here's his license. And the accident report."

Dollinger had just finished helping Stamaty tuck a blue plastic tarpaulin over Mulreedy's body. "Fritz," Auburn told him, nodding toward the closed lanes and the median, "somebody over there has to have seen something. And those guys are going to be knocking off work about now. Get with their foreman and talk to as many of them as you can."

Gavin Hoopes was just climbing down from his cab. He was a rangy, weather-beaten man in his mid thirties wearing cowboy boots. A pair of sunglasses hung in the V-neck of his pink T-shirt. He looked pale under his tan and his teeth chattered slightly. He smelled faintly of diesel fuel and less faintly of sweat.

Auburn showed his badge.

"Another city cop?" asked Hoopes. "Hey, man, I called a ten-forty-two in to the troopers, and I ain't seen Smokey yet."

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"Our courts have jurisdiction over the part of the Interstate that's inside city limits."

Hoopes did a double take at the mention of courts. "Man, I didn't even know we was *in* the city."

"How many beers did you put down at lunch, Mr. Hoopes?"

"Zip."

"Taking any pills? Been smoking anything?"

"Man, I'm clean." He made a sweeping gesture with both palms down.

"What happened to your arm?"

Hoopes examined a long shallow abrasion on his right forearm and shrugged it off. "Must have hit something up in the cab."

In the space between the truck and the wall, Hoopes successfully walked a more or less straight crack in the pavement, touched his nose with his eyes closed, and picked up a nickel from the ground.

"Did I pass?"

"So far. Blood tests for alcohol and drugs are mandatory after a fatal motor accident. You have the right to refuse, but in this state that's an automatic six months' suspension of your driver's license."

"Man, like I said, I'm clean. Let's do your tests and get it over with."

"Do you own this rig?"

"No, sir. Owner is Culver-Vaughan in Atlanta. I need to call in."

"Couple other things first." Auburn wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Could we get in the cab to talk?"

"Come up to my boudoir," said Hoopes with a giddy quiver in his voice. He walked around to the driver's side and climbed up behind the enormous wheel. Auburn mounted on the passenger's side.

"Where were you headed, Mr. Hoopes?"

"Wheeling. Hey, I already told all this to the guy with the big moustache."

"I know. I have Patrolman Bystrom's report right here. He took your statement about the accident for reporting purposes, as required by law. I'm talking to you because, in this particular accident, a man died. That makes this a homicide investigation."

The chattering of Hoopes's teeth became more pronounced as Auburn read him his rights.

"What kind of cargo have you got back there?"

"Steel office furniture." From a recess beside the seat Hoopes produced a battered aluminum case and handed it to Auburn. It opened like a book and each half contained a shallow compartment with a spring clip at the top to hold papers. Auburn quickly scanned a computer-generated cargo manifest, a routing slip, and

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a voucher from the truck scales east of town.

"Just tell me in your own words what happened."

"Like I told the other guy, this biker cut in front of me a couple miles back east, just before we dropped down to three lanes and I had to jog onto the right shoulder. I figured he was heading for the next exit—otherwise he wouldn't have come over in the slow lane."

"Was he traveling alone? I mean, were there any other bikers with him?"

"No, sir."

"Did you notice anything odd about the way he was driving?"

"Not then. And I was watching him pretty close, too, because he was right there like a fly on my nose."

"Were you crowding him?"

Hoopes shrugged. "He knew I was there."

"So what happened?"

"About three hundred yards back, I seen him let off his throttle and go into a kind of a wiggle, and then he went over. Man, I mean he went *over.* Him and that bike rolled like they was two alligators trying to eat each other."

"Any idea why he lost control?"

"No, sir, unless he was full of booze or dope."

"You didn't see anything hit him or his bike? Like a rock, or something that came off a rig up ahead?"

"No, sir."

"We didn't find any goggles or sunglasses. Could he have been blinded by the sun?"

"Sure—could have been."

"You say he cut in front of you. Could he have been wrangling with somebody else on the road?"

"Could have been. I didn't see it."

"And then you hit him?"

"Not till after he flipped a couple times like a hog on ice and bounced off the wall."

"What was your speed at the time?"

"Probably doing about forty."

That response was automatic: the posted limit in the construction zone. Auburn preserved a rhetorical silence, his pen suspended above the page.

Hoopes squirmed. "You ever drive an eighteen-wheeler before?"

"Not that I can remember."

"Well, let me tell you, you don't drive it, it drives you. Man, when you got twelve, fifteen tons of steel rolling behind you, you don't tell it what to do, you ask it, real polite, and hope you asked soon enough. I stomped on that brake as soon as I seen he was out of control, but by the time we stopped, the rig had skated fifty, sixty—hey, can't you measure my skid marks and tell how fast I

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was going?"

"There's an evidence technician down there right now, sir. He's going to measure those skid marks to the nearest centimeter, and take pictures of them from one end to the other. But the length of a skid mark depends not only on how fast the vehicle was going when the brakes were applied, but also on the coefficient of friction between the tires and the pavement. The judges in this jurisdiction won't accept skid marks in evidence without at least three comparison sets of marks that have been made at different speeds by the same vehicle with the same tires on the same pavement."

"Man, you'd have to shut down the whole Interstate to do that."

"Exactly. But your speed isn't the only issue here. However fast you're going, the law requires you to stay far enough behind whatever's in front of you to assure a safe stopping distance. If you kill somebody because you were tailgating, that's manslaughter."

Hoopes bit down hard on nothing. "So what am I looking at here? A fine, the slammer, what?"

"That's up to the judge. On the basis of what you've told me and what I can see at the scene, I'm citing you for unlawful operation—following too close and causing a fatal accident. As we gather evidence and testimony from any witnesses we can find, those charges may be dropped, or others may be added."

"So what's next?"

"Next we go to the hospital, get a dressing on that arm, and have them draw blood for some tests."

"Then do I get my license back?"

"Depends on what the tests show."

"And in the meantime the rig is going to sit right here in the middle of the Interstate?"

"No, sir. We'll have a driver move it off the highway. Unless it has to be towed."

"Shouldn't. She's got some body damage to the front fender, but the tires and the steering should be okay."

Auburn finished writing out Hoopes's citation and had him sign a form indicating he understood he was summoned to appear in municipal traffic court on the following Tuesday morning. After verifying the truck's Vehicle Identification Number from a plate riveted to the dashboard, he climbed down from the cab to recheck the registration number, examine the damage to the fender, and look for pellet marks on the front of the truck matching those on Mulreedy's motorcycle. He found none.

Contrary to Auburn's expectations, there was no indication that the road construction crew were getting ready to stop work for the day. The racket of the jackhammers went on unabated, and the excavating equipment and dump trucks still performed their clumsy adagio dance around one another. Out of the corner of his

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eye he noticed a State Highway Patrol cruiser bouncing across the median from the eastbound lanes.

The lone trooper parked on the far shoulder, got out of his cruiser, and stood with hands on hips surveying the accident scene from beyond the stream of cars and trucks whizzing past the obstruction. "Can that thing roll under its own power?" he called to Auburn.

"I think so. We've got a citizen down here on the shoulder between the trailer and the wall."

"I understand that. Anybody else injured? Can't the rescue crew handle the removal?"

Stamaty had joined Auburn in front of the cab. "Not in this county," he called across to the trooper. "That's a separate contract. The other guys are on the way, but their hearse hasn't got a siren or a light—"

"All right, but you've gotta open up another lane. You've got cars and trucks backed up all the way to the Heron Pike interchange. If just one of them overheats or runs out of gas . . ." He started moving orange barrels aside. "I'm coming over there."

While Myers held back the traffic, the trooper, whose name was Cullenbaugh, piloted his cruiser across the rubble-strewn closed lanes and parked it in line with the two Public Safety cruisers in front of the truck. After a rapid survey of the scene and a consultation with Auburn, he went back to his cruiser and arranged to have a driver dispatched to the scene to move Hoopes's rig off the highway. Hoopes turned over the keys to the truck in return for a receipt signed by Auburn.

Meanwhile Dollinger had come back from his trip to the construction zone. None of the workers had seen or heard anything unusual until they noticed that the westbound traffic, which they estimated had been zooming through the constricted area at close to 60 miles an hour, had bogged down. The racket of machinery and the roar of traffic ricocheting among concrete surfaces would have drowned out the screech of Hoopes's tires and the noise of the collision.

"And also the sound of a pellet gun up there," Auburn told Dollinger, nodding towards the Sixth Street overpass, behind which the sun was just sinking. "I'm taking this driver to the hospital to get a scratch on his arm taken care of and have them draw some blood. As soon as Kestrel arranges to get what's left of that cycle downtown to the garage, you and he ought to go up there on the overpass and take a look around."

Dollinger squinted at him whimsically in the afternoon glare. "Am *I* supposed to give him that order, Sergeant?"

"I think if you just make the suggestion, he'll jump at it." Auburn jingled the keys to the cruiser. "You've both got to find

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something to do till you have a way back to headquarters."

Auburn drove Hoopes to Chalfont Hospital to have his scratched arm scrubbed and wrapped up. While a technician was drawing blood samples for alcohol and drug tests, Auburn called headquarters and initiated background checks on Hoopes and his employer. Lieutenant Savage had gone home for the day, and no one had made any effort yet to reach Roger Mulreedy's next of kin.

Auburn called Mulreedy's home phone number and got no answer, not even an answering machine. Since there was no one else with the same last name listed in the phone book, his next call was to Mulreedy's employer, Welbeck Heating and Cooling. Jerry Welbeck, the owner of the business, answered the phone himself.

"Mr. Welbeck, this is Sergeant Auburn with the Public Safety Department. I understand Roger Mulreedy is an employee of yours?"

"Roger, sure, Roger works for me."

"I have some bad news for you, sir. Mr. Mulreedy was seriously injured in an accident a few minutes ago."

You feed them the story in little bites and see how they swallow each one before you give them the next.

"An accident where? At the rink?" Welbeck sounded as if he might be worrying about expenses, insurance, time lost from work—anything but the well-being of somebody he cared about.

"No, sir. This was a motorcycle accident on the Interstate. Mr. Mulreedy was killed outright."

Silence. Was the man at the other end of the line struggling to master his grief, or was he grinning from ear to ear?

When at last Welbeck spoke, his tone was almost hostile. "Why are you calling me?"

"I'm trying to trace his next of kin. I understand he was married. Do you know how I might reach his wife?"

At the end of an even longer silence, Welbeck said, "They're separated, but I can find you her number, sure. What I'd like to know is what Roger was doing on the Interstate at this time of day."

"We don't know that, sir. He was traveling west through the construction zone downtown, and a witness said he lost control of his bike and rolled it. Was there somewhere else he was supposed to be this afternoon?"

"Well, sure. He's been doing a big installation job in Wilmot, and I would have thought he'd have been tied up there till six or seven tonight."

"Would you know if he'd had any personal troubles lately, any drinking problems . . . ?"

"You're thinking like a cop," said Welbeck, not answering the question, "and I'm thinking like an engineer. I still can't figure out

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what he would have been doing in that place at that hour."

Welbeck's reaction to the news of Mulreedy's death seemed so cagey and odd that Auburn hesitated to pursue his inquiries over the telephone. He could hear people shouting and dogs barking at the other end of the line.

"Are you at home now, sir?"

"Actually I'm at my dad's place by the river. We have a cookout here with some of the guys from the shop after work every Friday during the summer months."

"Could you give me your address there?"

"Sure. You go north on Calthrop Road till you hit the river. It's the big farm on the left—you can't miss it. You thinking of coming out here tonight?"

"Possibly. Will you be there for a while?"

"Possibly," Welbeck echoed. "But this is my cell phone I'm talking on. It picks up all incoming calls when the office is closed, and it rides with me wherever I go."

According to Welbeck, Mulreedy's estranged wife lived with her parents. Welbeck told him their name and the street they lived on, but when Auburn tried their phone number he got no answer.

He caught up with Hoopes in the office of the hospital lab, where he was sweating out a phone interview with the home office of his company in Atlanta. On seeing Auburn, he covered the mouthpiece of the receiver and asked, "Hey, am I under arrest?"

"Depends on what the blood tests show." Auburn moved away while Hoopes relayed that message and finished his conversation.

Getting the results of the tests would take more than an hour. Since Auburn needed to keep an eye on Hoopes until he was cleared of a DUI charge, they had dinner together in the part of the hospital cafeteria reserved for visitors. Hoopes professed not to have any appetite, but then proceeded to put down an amount and variety of food that would probably have sent Auburn down the hall to the emergency room.

Hoopes had been driving professionally for twelve years. He denied ever having been involved in an accident of any description before. Auburn listened to his nervous chatter with one ear while pondering various details of Mulreedy's death—the pockmarks on the windshield of the cycle, Welbeck's evasive manner, and Hoopes's highly plausible account of Mulreedy's sudden loss of control of the cycle.

At length the results of the blood alcohol and preliminary drug screen became available, and showed that Hoopes was, to use his own word, clean. Auburn drove him to a truckers' stop where he would stay at least overnight.

When he returned with the cruiser to headquarters, Auburn found that Dollinger and Kestrel had hitched a ride back with

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Myers and Bystrom. Dollinger reported that he and Kestrel had visited the Sixth Street overpass after Mulreedy's body had been removed from the scene and the semi had been moved to the State Highway Patrol post at New Leyden. They had found no indication that anyone had lurked on the sidewalk there or used the low concrete parapet as a rest for a firearm.

Auburn tried to reach Mulreedy's widow again by phone, without success. It was a little after 7:30 and still broad daylight. He decided to see Jerry Welbeck face to face in an effort to get some tangible information about Mulreedy's background, associations, and recent history.

It took him almost a half-hour to get to the Welbeck farm, where Calthrop Road dipped into a valley to end abruptly at the river. The inscription "RIVERDALE FARM. SIMON WELBECK. 1897" was emblazoned across the front of a big red barn in black letters. Auburn followed a graveled driveway between a field of tall standing corn on one side and the sloping riverbank on the other.

Beyond the barn, about a dozen cars and trucks were parked helter-skelter under widely spaced mature trees. All the trucks were identical—charcoal-gray panel trucks belonging to Welbeck Heating and Cooling, with flamboyant lettering and striping in canary yellow, each with a rack on the top bearing a red fiberglass extension ladder. Auburn parked his car and got out.

Welbeck's description hadn't quite prepared him for the size of the crowd down on the riverbank. He estimated that at least forty people, mostly men in work clothes but also a few women, were gathered on a level stretch of turf around a stone fireplace and picnic benches. Some were eating and drinking, and a few were pitching horseshoes. Three canoes lay inverted on a moss-grown stone landing.

It was ten degrees cooler here than in the city. As Auburn made his way down to the level of the water, four or five mongrel dogs came sniffing and whimpering around him. Somebody whistled them back and called reassuringly, "They won't bother you, buddy, they're just kind of stupid."

Under the trees the evening light shimmered like swirls of green and gold dust. The air was spiced with the smell of wood smoke, roast meat, and barbeque sauce. A radio was playing softly, barely audible above the steady chirping of crickets and locusts. The mood of the crowd seemed somber. Most of them wore gray work uniforms with shoulder patches bearing the company name. A man in a short-sleeved shirt with a clip-on bow tie came forward to meet Auburn.

"I'm Jerry Welbeck," he said. His manner was suave but he didn't offer to shake hands.

"Sergeant Auburn. We talked on the phone."

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"Sure." Welbeck glanced with a perfunctory nod at Auburn's identification. He had broad shoulders, smooth features, and prematurely white hair. He held his elbows out from his sides like a wrestler getting ready to pounce. He pointed to a galvanized steel tub full of melting ice. "Pull up a brew. Plenty of food left. Do you like hot wings?"

"Thanks, I just had dinner. I still haven't been able to reach Mrs. Mulreedy. I thought I'd come by and talk to you personally if you've got a minute."

"Sure, sure. All the time in the world. This is our guys' weekly happy hour. Only thing is, everybody's a little down tonight after hearing about Roger." The lower part of his face kept changing shape, as if he were trying out one type of smile after another before deciding which one he would finally adopt. "You find out anything more? About how it happened, I mean?"

"No, sir, but we feel it may not have been an accident."

"You mean maybe this truck driver ran him down on purpose?"

The other men were watching and listening with unconcealed curiosity. Eight or ten of them drifted close around Welbeck and Auburn. They showed their boss no particular deference, and seemed disposed to allow him no privacy.

"Not exactly that," said Auburn. "But there are some unanswered questions about exactly what caused him to lose control of his motorcycle."

"Like maybe somebody tampered with the brakes, the steering . . . ?"

"Possibly that. Or somebody may have done something at the time of the accident."

"But who? How?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. I asked you on the phone about any problems he might have had recently . . ."

"And I weaseled out of answering," Welbeck admitted frankly. "Any of these folks here will tell you Roger was kind of a prickly pear. As a service technician he was second to none, and he never missed a day of work. But whenever I could, I had to have him work alone, because he couldn't get along with the other guys. Estimates and sales—forget it. Sooner or later he'd get in some stupid argument with the customer, and then the whole deal was off."

"Had he had any trouble with anybody in particular lately?" Auburn directed his question to the whole group of Mulreedy's coworkers, fully aware that this might be like asking the kindergarten class who spilled the Kool-Aid. "Any threats, open confrontations, fist fights . . . ?"

There was a general shaking of heads. "Roger wasn't about to use his fists," observed a wiry, sharp-featured man who was nearing retirement age. "He had a tongue on him like a rattlesnake,

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but that was about the only kind of fighting he was into."

"I understand he was separated from his wife."

Most of the men suddenly looked at their shoes, and Welbeck fidgeted uncomfortably. "Like I told you on the phone," he said, "Patty's been back living with her folks for five or six months now."

"I know it's a ticklish thing for you to talk about, but—were there lots of hard feelings there, on either side?"

Welbeck nodded rapidly, as if he were eager to dismiss the subject. "Lots, I'd say. On both sides. Some of the girls could tell you better." The women were busy tending the fireplaces, collecting the garbage, feeding the scraps to the dogs. None of them had ventured to join the tribal pow-wow.

"Were you expecting Mulreedy here tonight?" Auburn asked Welbeck.

"Frankly, I wasn't. Roger's been here a couple times over the years but, like I said, he didn't really mix very well, and he didn't drink. I still can't figure out what he was doing out on the Interstate this afternoon."

"I can tell you that," said a burly youth with blond hair cut in a burr. He stepped forward with the ungainly strut of a bodybuilder. Unlike the others, he was wearing a set of camouflage fatigues, spattered and smeared with red, blue, and green paint. "I was at the shop cleaning out the bins like I do every Friday afternoon," he said, addressing both his boss and Auburn. "Roger came in to make a long-distance call to Dooley's about the specs on that air handler at the rink. After that he got another call, and about five minutes later he took off on his cycle."

"Who called him?" asked Welbeck.

The man drank noisily from a can of beer before answering. "I don't know. I was in the back. He answered the phone himself."

"Left his truck at the shop?"

"Sure. It was still there when I left at six."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"Him tell me anything? Go figure."

"What time would that have been?" Welbeck was asking Auburn's questions for him, and doing just fine.

"Maybe four. Little after."

"Did you see which direction he went?" asked Auburn.

"No, sir, I didn't." There was something vaguely military in the way the man answered.

"Is there any way to trace that call?"

"I wouldn't think so," said Welbeck, "unless it was a collect toll call."

"This rink you mentioned . . ."

"The new Roundhouse Rink up in Wilmot. We're doing the climate-control system."

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Auburn recognized the name because the owner of the rink, a sleazy local real-estate developer named Chuck Fibbiger, had aroused the wrath of two or three citizens' groups by applying for, and getting, a liquor license. The people of the suburb of Wilmot, descended from English and Scottish settlers, had a largely undeserved reputation for stodginess and conservatism. But their indignation over the liquor license was understandable, in view of the expectation that at least three-quarters of the patrons of a roller-skating rink would be under drinking age.

Deciding that he'd learned everything he was likely to from this bunch, Auburn thanked them and started back toward his car.

"Sir!" The call was peremptory, almost insolent. Auburn turned to see the young man with the paint stains on his fatigues stalking him under the trees. "Talk to you a minute, sir?"

"Sure."

The man drew closer, looking back over his shoulder to see whether he was observed by the others. "I just thought I ought to let you know why you couldn't get Patty on the phone before."

Auburn eyed him expectantly. Again he was struck by the other's military bearing, which was probably accentuated by the camouflage fatigues.

"She was right here. She only left about a half-hour before you got here."

"Mulreedy's wife was here? At the cookout?"

"Yes, sir. She pals around with some of the other girls. She comes around sometimes even though she and Roger are busted up."

"Do you know if Welbeck told her her husband was dead?"

"Yes, sir, he did."

At least, thought Auburn, I've been spared that chore. But his relief didn't distract him from wondering what hidden agenda had prompted this musclebound mug to tell him that Patty Mulreedy had been enjoying herself at the cookout while her estranged husband was getting himself killed on the Interstate.

"Did she go home from here?" he asked.

"Her folks's home, sure. She came out with one of the guys and his wife, and they took her back."

"How upset was she?"

"She took it pretty rough."

"Had they been trying to work things out, do you think, or were they getting a divorce?"

"Neither one. She wouldn't talk divorce but she couldn't stand living in the same house with him."

"Did he beat her up?"

"That I wouldn't know." Auburn's informant fell silent, as if he had suddenly decided he'd said too much, or maybe that the

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exchange was degenerating into a gossip session.

"What's your name, sir?"

"Greg Wamblitt."

After Auburn reached his car, he took the time to record the registration numbers of the two motorcycles and five private cars in the parking area, also noting which car had a National Rifle Association logo on its rear window and which one had a bumper sticker reading "The Devil Is My Godfather."

From the Welbeck farm, Auburn drove straight to the home of Patty Mulreedy's parents, the Dermotts. Since it was almost on his way back to town, he decided not to call first. The house was a modest two-story brick in an old but still respectable residential district.

The man who came to the door might have been wearing that hard, dour face because his son-in-law had just been killed, but Auburn suspected he had looked exactly the same way for about the past twenty years. He bent awkwardly at hips and knees to view Auburn's identification through his bifocals, then conducted him without a word into a family room, where his wife was administering what comfort she could to their daughter.

Roger Mulreedy's widow was curled up in a corner of the couch where she'd probably cried over many a broken heart before. She wasn't looking her best tonight, what with red eyes, smeared mascara, and peeling sunburn on her nose. On Auburn's arrival she pulled herself together and took him to a screened back porch where it was nearly dark and where they could talk privately.

She vanished into the shadows of an overstuffed chair, while Auburn sat in a wicker rocker that squeaked at the slightest movement. He expressed his sympathy and his regret that he needed to bother her at such a time.

"It's all right," she said in a hushed contralto. "If you hadn't come to me I would probably have come to you."

"About your husband's death?"

"Yes. Are you calling it an accident?"

"That seems the likeliest possibility. But the investigation has just started. Do you think maybe it wasn't an accident?"

She was silent for a few moments, and when she finally spoke she seemed to be picking her words carefully. "I don't have any way of knowing that. After I heard the police were looking for me, I called headquarters downtown, but they wouldn't tell me much because I wasn't calling from home and I couldn't prove who I was."

As nearly as Auburn could judge in the semidarkness, this woman was genuinely grieving. He gave her a brief outline of what had happened on the Interstate, without mentioning the pockmarked cycle or the arrest of Gavin Hoopes.

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"I think you ought to know about something that happened a few weeks ago," she said. "Something that couldn't have been an accident. Somebody tried to kill Roger."

"Can you tell me about that?"

"I'll tell you what I know. He was installing an air-conditioning system. He cut the power and locked it off, but somebody turned it back on again. He only found out by accident that the power was on again, when a tool touched two wires and threw a spark. It was a high-voltage line. If it had been his hand, he could have gone up in smoke right then and there."

"When did you say this happened?"

"Between three and four weeks ago."

"And where was he working at the time?"

"It's a big remodeling project up in Wilmot. They're turning an old canning factory into a skating rink."

"Why couldn't it have been an accident?"

"It just couldn't. You don't unlock a high-voltage circuit breaker until you know who locked it off and why."

"Did he have any idea who did it? Who else had a key?"

"They use combination locks. Nobody but the person who locked off the power to work on the circuit is supposed to know the combination."

"Was this reported to the authorities?"

"I don't think Roger told anybody but me."

"I understand you and he were separated."

"Not legally. We just decided to give each other some more space, so I moved back here." A long silence followed, during which Auburn could hear dogs barking, neighbors dragging trash cans out to the curb, children playing boisterously in an alley, somebody tuning up a car that needed a new muffler worse than a tune-up.

"He could be awfully difficult," she said at length. "Bull-headed, unreasonable. There's a broadloom floor mat about ten feet long in our back hall. It seems logical to me that it ought to run straight down the middle of the hall, parallel to the two side walls. But Roger thought it should lie at an angle, closer to the outside door at one end, and closer to the kitchen door at the other. So every time he walked through the hall, he'd move that rug off center."

And, thought Auburn, every time you walked through the hall, you'd move it back straight. It takes two to keep a conflict smoldering, whether it's an all-out war or a petty marital squabble. Maybe it was hearing such tales of discord and strife year in and year out that had thus far kept Auburn single.

The list of grievances went on. "He made me get contact lenses," she said, "because he didn't like the way I looked in glasses. And then he made me pay for them. But that was all right. I was making more money than he was." Just as, moments earlier, he could

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feel her pain in the dark, he now sensed something different—a smug conviction of superiority to the dead man.

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a speech therapist. And I also teach."

"I understand you were out at the Welbeck farm this evening when I called."

"I didn't know it was you that called." She paused only briefly and then went on, apparently feeling that Auburn expected some kind of explanation. "I went with Ginny Caruso and her husband. They live just a couple of blocks from here."

"Did you expect your husband to be there?"

"Oh, no. Roger was never welcome there and he knew it."

"How's that?"

"Those cookouts are for Jerry's pets, and that didn't include Roger. He didn't drink, he didn't smoke, he wouldn't pad estimates."

"Do you think one of Welbeck's 'pets' might have unlocked that circuit breaker and turned it back on?"

"No. No, I can't believe that. But if Roger's death wasn't an accident, whoever was behind it was probably the same person who played that trick with the circuit breaker."

"Any guesses who that might be?"

She sighed heavily and he could see her vague silhouette shifting in the deep chair. "It was probably one of Chuck Fibbiger's goons," she said, her voice now barely above a whisper, as if she were afraid of being overheard. "But you'll never prove it. I can't even imagine the police department taking him on."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he's got too much clout. Look how the newspapers always treat him like some kind of saint, even though everybody knows he's as crooked as—"

"I mean, why did you say he might have been behind your husband's death?"

"Because he wanted Roger to double-cross Jerry Welbeck on the skating-rink job, and Roger wouldn't do it." She seemed very positive of the basic facts, but couldn't supply any more details.

She had some questions about funeral arrangements. Auburn wrote Nick Stamaty's name and phone number for her on the back of one of his own cards and left it by the porch door without going back through the house.

At eleven o'clock that night, the local radio and TV newscasts included an appeal for information to anyone who had seen the accident in the construction zone on the Interstate. Auburn watched to be sure the announcer used the exact text of the message he'd e-mailed to the station, in which he'd carefully avoided the word "witness," with its connotations of stuffy courtrooms, bul-

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lying defense lawyers, lost time from work, and endless red tape.

Ten minutes after Auburn arrived at headquarters next morning, Stamaty called him from the coroner's office at the courthouse across the street with the preliminary results of the autopsy. Auburn abandoned once and for all the hypothesis that Roger Mulreedy's death might have been accidental.

His skull and rib cage had been shattered, his brain and internal organs pulped, and all four limbs nearly wrenched from his torso. The forensic pathologist, who knew about the pockmarks on the windshield of Mulreedy's motorcycle, had taken X-rays, and these showed two .50-caliber steel balls buried in his neck.

"Fifty caliber?" repeated Auburn incredulously. "We're talking cannonballs here!"

"Near enough," agreed Stamaty.

"Were they the cause of death?"

"Not directly. I mean, they didn't get near his spine or cut any major blood vessels. But they sure must have taken his mind off his driving."

"Two," said Auburn, deep in thought. "And four dents in the windshield. Any way these could have come out of a piece of machinery up ahead?"

"I think maybe that's what somebody wants us to think, but I wouldn't buy it. If a ball bearing accidentally came apart up ahead on the highway and flipped out a handful of balls, they couldn't have had enough velocity to penetrate the skin, even with him coming to meet them at fifty or sixty miles an hour."

"So either there were a half-dozen hoodlums up there on the Sixth Street overpass with slingshots . . ."

"Or there was one hoodlum up there with a semi-automatic weapon of some kind that lobs half-inch ball bearings. A smooth-bore weapon—there weren't any rifling marks on the projectiles."

The lab tests had shown no alcohol or drugs in Mulreedy's blood.

The Records Department, shut down to a skeleton crew for the weekend as of five o'clock the previous afternoon, had completed partial background reports on Hoopes, Mulreedy and his wife, and Welbeck and his business. So far there was no evidence that any of them had police records, bad credit ratings, or suspected criminal associations. Patricia Mulreedy, née Dermott, was a hospital volunteer in her spare time and Jerome R. Welbeck was a deacon at his church.

From the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, Auburn had obtained the names and addresses of the people to whom the private cars and motorcycles at the Welbeck farm were registered. According to the city directory, every one of those people was employed by Welbeck Heating and Cooling. Auburn asked Records to initiate background checks on all of them, and did such investigating as he was

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able to do on his own.

Also pursuing his own research on Fibbiger, he found no record of arrests or convictions. But an Internet search turned up lots of newspaper references, including several pertaining to the liquor license for the skating rink in Wilmot. Besides the projected rink, Fibbiger was proprietor of an electronic penny arcade called Total Aggravation at an upscale suburban mall, identified by persistent rumors as a hard-drug distribution center.

As Patty Mulreedy had said, the papers tended to handle Fibbiger with kid gloves. But the cumulative impression one gained from all the articles was that of a callous and unscrupulous slum landlord, a predator who bought at rock-bottom prices from people who had to dispose of real estate to settle an estate or a divorce or to avoid bankruptcy, an ambitious and unprincipled promoter of schemes that often went sour at other people's expense. Whether he was capable of murder remained to be determined.

Radio and TV appeals for information had so far yielded no returns.

At ten o'clock Auburn met with his immediate superior, Lieutenant Savage, who had pulled weekend duty as first watch commander. They agreed that all charges against Gavin Hoopes should be dropped, and then discussed what direction the investigation should take.

"If this is just a random killing by some loony with a pellet gun," said Savage, "we're not going to get very far with it. But it sounds to me like this Mulreedy was the kind of misfit who gets people's backs up pretty easily, and I've got a feeling the killer knew exactly who he was taking down. Especially since there's a question of a prior attempt. So it's basically a matter of nosing around till you find somebody who had a clear motive, and opportunity for both attempts."

"The widow said she thought her husband was in some kind of trouble with Fibbiger. He could have paid somebody—she said one of his 'goons'—to do the job while he was somewhere else establishing an alibi."

"And maybe *she* paid a goon to do it while she was fifteen miles out in the country establishing an alibi." Savage got up and started pacing slowly around his desk. "Whoever did the actual killing must have known Mulreedy was going to be at that exact spot at that time."

"Maybe because they told him to go that way," suggested Auburn. "The one witness, Wamblitt, says Mulreedy got a phone call at the shop right before he headed for the Interstate. We probably can't get anything from the phone company without a court order, but I'd like to try."

"Okay, but you might as well put that on a back burner. On a

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Saturday you're not going to get anything out of the business office at the phone company but a bubbly voice on an answering machine. What were you planning to do this morning?"

"I thought I'd try to see Fibbiger, if I can get past *his* answering machine. I'd like to find out if he knows anything about this alleged incident with the circuit breaker at the skating rink. Or if he'll admit he had some kind of fight with Mulreedy."

"Okay, but tread carefully, Cy. Fibbiger's lawyers are getting paid more to keep him out of court than you and I together are getting paid to . . . do whatever it is we're getting paid to do."

After leaving Savage's office, Auburn got Gavin Hoopes out of bed to tell him all charges against him had been dropped and that he was free to hit the road again. Then he called Chuck Fibbiger's office and arranged to meet him later that morning.

The sky was the color of an oyster shell, with a vivid luminosity that hurt the eyes. The air was still, but the threat of a summer storm added a brooding sense of tension and expectancy to the oppressive heat of the dog days.

Fibbiger conducted his real-estate business in a restored row house on Wasatch Court. Like most of the other houses in the row, this one had business premises on the street level and living quarters upstairs. Fibbiger probably owned every building in sight.

An ornate receptionist took him straight back to an oak-paneled office, where he found Fibbiger at a desk surrounded by framed awards, gilded plastic trophies, and pictures of buildings, Irish setters, and grandchildren. His face was familiar to anybody who read the local papers, but in the years since that oft-published photograph had been taken, he had lost some hair and gained a lot of weight. And nothing Auburn had ever seen in the papers had prepared him for the fact that this reputed crime boss was about five feet two. In an old plaid shirt and a pair of faded jeans, he looked like a retired jockey.

Fibbiger made a point of not looking at Auburn's ID. "Detectives and realtors have to work weekends, don't we?" he remarked breezily. When he smiled, his brows shut down like a trunk lid, converting his eyes into jagged slits. He waved Auburn to a seat opposite the desk. "What have I done this time?"

"Just a routine investigation, sir. A man who's been working at the new skating rink up in Wilmot was killed last night on the highway. Maybe you saw it on the news?"

"Somebody who works for me got killed last night?"

"Actually he was working for Welbeck, the heating and cooling contractor. A Roger Mulreedy."

"Okay. Okay." He nodded slowly, as if memories were filtering through. "I know who you mean. What happened to him?"

"He wrecked his motorcycle on the Interstate, in the construc-

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tion zone downtown."

"Hey, I'm sorry to hear that." His tone was detached and perfunctory, like that of a realtor pretending to commiserate with a client who waited to read the fine print until after signing the contract. "So how can I help you?"

"We're trying to figure out what he was doing on the Interstate yesterday between four and four-thirty. Would you have any ideas about that?"

"Not a clue. I haven't been up to the rink myself for more than a week. And I let my contractors look after their own guys."

"Mulreedy got a phone call at the shop right before he headed for the Interstate. We thought he might have been coming here."

"I wouldn't think so. Anyway, I didn't call him."

"Had you had any discussions with him about the job, deadlines, costs . . . ?"

"No, sir. Like I said, my business was with Jerry Welbeck. This guy was just one of his peons. I didn't even remember his name."

"There was one other thing," said Auburn. "Mulreedy told his wife that, about a month ago, up at the rink, somebody turned on a power line while he was working on it. Did you hear anything about that?"

"Oh, yes," said Fibbiger, again nodding reflectively. "It's all coming back to me now. Here's what happened, the way I remember it. The carpenters and plasterers wouldn't start work until the air conditioning was installed. They said their adhesives and joint compound wouldn't set up right in the heat and humidity. But you know as well as I do that it was their own sweet selves they were worrying about.

"Anyway, I asked Jerry to get the air conditioning going as quick as he could, and what does he do? He sends in this guy—what's his name?—Mulreedy, with a chip on his shoulder about the size of Canada. Right away the whole project turns into one big nightmare. The plumbers get in a fight with the flooring contractor. The roofers say the bricklayers stole part of their scaffolding. And then Mulreedy claims one of the electricians tried to fry him because he borrowed some wire."

"This was reported to you, then?"

"Not directly. I probably heard about it a week or so after it happened."

"So you don't know how much truth there might be in it?"

"No, sir, I don't. And I don't see what it's got to do with a traffic accident on the Interstate, either."

"It wasn't an accident," said Auburn. "Mulreedy was shot."

"Now I know why you're here." Fibbiger grinned disarmingly, showing a gold tooth. "I'll bet you play a fierce game of chess."

"I could never remember all the rules," said Auburn with perfect truth.

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Welbeck Heating and Cooling was headquartered outside the city limits on Hanover Road, in a district of small factories, machine shops, specialty garages, and warehouses. The business occupied an L-shaped one-story building that was almost completely surrounded by woods. Only a big white sign running along the driveway was visible from the road. Auburn counted eleven company trucks in the parking lot. Three private cars were there as well, two of which Auburn had seen at the cookout the evening before.

He entered the building by a door marked COUNTER SALES. The salesroom was long and narrow. Displays of humidifiers and cartons of furnace filters were arranged along one wall neatly but with little sense of market appeal.

Greg Wamblitt, the arrogant young man who had stood at parade rest last evening while making sure that Auburn knew Patty Mulreedy had been at the cookout, was behind the counter. Auburn's research earlier in the day had informed him that Wamblitt was a first sergeant in a local National Guard unit. Another man was talking on a phone at the counter, taking an order from a customer.

Jerry Welbeck, who evidently—like realtors and detectives—had to work on weekends, was busy at a computer in a glassed-in office. As soon as he saw Auburn he came to the door of the office and invited him in.

His manner was cooperative rather than cordial. "Find out anything yet?"

"I'm afraid we did. Roger Mulreedy was shot in the neck with a couple of steel balls."

Welbeck instantly broke eye contact and stared unseeingly through a picture window facing the woods. The long silence that followed reminded Auburn of the intervals in their phone conversation on the previous afternoon.

"Are you sure about that?" he asked finally.

"Well, the forensic pathologist seems to be. That makes it homicide. I'd like to ask you about something that happened a few weeks ago when Mulreedy was working up at the rink. He told his wife that somebody unlocked a circuit breaker while he was working on the circuit. Did you know about that?"

"Did I ever! Roger as much as accused me of issuing him a lock that somebody else knew the combination to. Like I told you, he was a very paranoid guy. My guess is that he didn't shove the shackle all the way down in the lock. Whoever found it that way figured it had been unlocked and took it off the breaker. So you found Patty?"

"I talked to her last night."

"Was she okay?"

"She seemed to be doing all right. I understand she was at your cookout when I called you."

Wamblitt wasn't visible to either of them at the moment, but

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Auburn would have sworn that Welbeck's eyes shifted for a fraction of a second in the direction of the salesroom before he answered. "That's right, she was," he said, with a hint of discomfiture. "She came with my sales manager, Caruso, and his wife. They live just up the street from her folks."

"And after you and I talked on the phone, you told her her husband had been killed?"

"Actually, I told Ginny Caruso, and she took Patty aside and broke the news to her."

"I'd like to trace that phone call Mulreedy got just before he hit the road yesterday. Have you checked on that?"

"I don't really know how to check on it."

"I thought maybe you had a phone that records the source of incoming calls."

"I've got five phones, not counting this cell phone. But they're all just your generic squawk boxes."

"You should be able to get the number by calling the phone company from the phone it came in on. But not on a Saturday. I think your counter man said Mulreedy picked up the phone himself."

"I think he did too, but let's ask him. He's right out there."

Wamblitt repeated his story of the previous evening, to the effect that he had been working in the storage area behind the salesroom when Roger Mulreedy came in to make a long-distance call to a manufacturer. When the phone rang at the counter, Mulreedy had picked it up, spoken briefly, hung up, and left the premises without a word to Wamblitt. Wamblitt wasn't even sure which of three phones he'd been talking on.

As Auburn left Welbeck's, the big white sign at the end of the parking lot caught his eye again. It appeared to have been decorated with graffiti in red, yellow, and green. Only when he got up close, he could see it wasn't graffiti but blotches of paint.

By the time he returned to Welbeck's shop late that afternoon, accompanied by Patrolman Bystrom, Auburn had put in three hours of intensive investigation. After an illuminating session with a State Highway Patrol officer, he had tracked down Lieutenant Howell Dunbar, Chief of the Robbery Division, who had the weekend off. He had also applied for and obtained search and arrest warrants.

Welbeck and Wamblitt were both still at the shop. This time Welbeck came out of his office to meet Auburn. "This looks ominous," he said when he saw Bystrom's uniform.

"I'd like to verify some times," said Auburn without preamble. "Can you tell me when Mrs. Mulreedy arrived at the cookout last night?"

"She was there when I got there," said Welbeck.

"And what time was that?"

"Well, let me think. I cleaned out the cash register about three-thirty and took some cash and checks to the bank. I probably got

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to the farm about four-thirty or a quarter to five."

"Can you confirm that, Mr. Wamblitt?"

Wamblitt looked up from a tray of parts he was sorting at the counter. "I'm afraid not, sir."

"Mr. Welbeck," said Auburn, "when I was at the farm last night you said you couldn't figure out what Mulreedy was doing on the Interstate at that hour." He turned to address Wamblitt. "And that was when you told us about the phone call Mulreedy got just before he left. You hadn't told your boss about that earlier because you weren't at the cookout when I called, were you?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this," said Welbeck. Auburn had noticed during their prior interviews that Welbeck was one of those dangerous people who smile when they're at a loss—when they're stumped, cornered, or about to explode with rage. But he wasn't smiling now. "Greg?" he said.

"Gregory Wamblitt," said Auburn, "I have a warrant for your arrest on a charge of first-degree murder." He recited the canonical warnings.

Wamblitt, pale and sweating, came to attention and put his back against a steel cabinet. "Wait a minute here," he said, stuttering slightly. "You're making a mistake."

"There's no mistake, sir, and you know it. The commanding officer of your National Guard unit, Colonel Dunbar, also happens to be a division chief with the Department of Public Safety. He and I had a long talk this afternoon about the field exercises you run for the troops, where two teams try to capture each other's flags without getting shot. Shot with paint balls, that is.

"I found out a whole lot about paint guns today. They're powered by compressed air or carbon dioxide and they shoot soft gelatin balls filled with oil-based paint—fifty-caliber balls. A fully automatic paint gun can get off a burst of ten or more balls a second. The guns used in league play are limited to a muzzle velocity that won't do any harm to unprotected skin even at fairly short range. But you were playing for keeps, weren't you? And your gun was loaded with half-inch steel balls."

Wamblitt took a deep breath and let it out slowly while he tried to gauge how much of Auburn's accusation was guesswork and how much of it might be based on hard evidence. "I own some paint guns," he admitted, "but I've never used one to shoot anything but paint balls. And I wasn't anywhere near the Interstate yesterday afternoon."

"Let's see if I can boost your memory a bit," said Auburn. "When I left here around noontime today, I got on the Interstate to retrace Mulreedy's route from here to the spot where he got killed. But I never made it.

"Just before the highway enters the city limits, there's a truck

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weighing station. When it's open, all trucks over a certain size have to leave the highway and get on the scales to make sure their axle and cargo weights aren't over the limits. The inspectors also do a safety check and verify the driver's ID. The driver or owner gets fined for weight or safety violations, or if the truck shoots past the station without turning in.

"In order to catch the ones who sneak past, there's a TV camera mounted over the highway just beyond the access ramp to the weigh station. The inspectors take turns watching the monitor and alerting the troopers patrolling the highway when a trucker guns on by. The whole thing goes on videotape so they have evidence to prove violations. And at five after four yesterday afternoon, you were taped driving west on the Interstate with Roger Mulreedy following right behind you on his motorcycle."

Wamblitt seemed about to speak, looked from Welbeck to Bystrom, and remained silent.

"The paint gun mounted on your luggage rack shows up on the videotape as plain as a lizard on a rock. We could even see the trip wire running to the window on the driver's side. You took a few practice shots at the sign outside here first, didn't you, to get your range—sighting through the rearview mirror?"

Seeing all hope of a successful defense crushed, Wamblitt nodded dispiritedly. "There wasn't any phone call," he admitted. "I told Roger that Patty had been in an accident and that I was supposed to lead him to the place. When we got to the construction zone on the Interstate, I slowed down so Roger crowded up on me, and the semi in back of him crowded up on him. As soon as I got him in range, I let him have it."

"What was your particular beef with Mulreedy," asked Auburn, "if you don't mind my asking?"

Wamblitt was still standing at attention but his military snap and most of his vitality seemed to have disappeared. "I've been in love with Patty ever since we were kids," he said. "She made a horrible mistake when she married Roger, and she knew it, but she wouldn't divorce him. So I figured it was up to me to help her work things out."

"You tried it once before, didn't you? Up at the rink, when you sneaked in and unlocked that circuit breaker. You seem to be sort of the quartermaster around here. You probably issued him that combination lock yourself—"

"Have you got that on videotape, too?" asked Wamblitt, with a half-hearted show of defiance.

Auburn produced a search warrant. "Let's go out and take a look in your car, Mr. Wamblitt."

One of the automatic paint-ball guns in Wamblitt's trunk was still partially loaded with half-inch steel balls. ●

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Art by Mark Evans

The Breaks

by Timothy Williams

The day that Willie Boyd died was as gray and tattered as the sheets on the motel bed where I found him. I stood outside room nineteen, smoking and watching sheets of rain roll towards the Mississippi while a couple of state troopers and a West Memphis homicide detective tromped around in the room, grousing about the late-November weather. This morning the Trucker's Paradise Motor Lodge was short on bliss but loaded with truckers. Their eighteen-wheelers sat nose to tail in the parking lot like cattle heading through a slaughterhouse chute. One cockroach shy of being condemned, the motel's coffee shop was packed with burly, pot-bellied long-haulers and truck-stop hookers who seemed to think white boots, pastel-colored miniskirts, and imitation-fur jackets were suitable breakfast attire. The rooms themselves offered vibrating beds, puke-stained carpets, rusted tubs, and "premium" pay-per-view cable that showed adult movies twenty-four hours a day. All in all, the Trucker's Paradise seemed to be a suitable place for a man to die with a half-empty bottle of Gordon's gin on the nightstand, a .22 revolver on the floor, and bullet holes in his chest and head.

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I smoked one Kool to its butt and lit another, wondering idly if the ache in the pit of my stomach was grief. Then I decided that if I had to wonder, it probably wasn't. Back in high school, Willie Boyd and I had been friends, but I'd turned forty-two just a couple of weeks earlier. High school seemed a lifetime away, and the freckled, undergrown kid we'd called Wee Willie at Southaven High didn't have a lot in common with the pudgy, moon-faced corpse inside room nineteen.

The two state troopers stepped from the room, their felt hats in their hands, nodded briskly at me, and then hurried to the cruiser. They looked almost like identical twins with their brush cuts, broad shoulders, and narrow waists, and I wondered if there wasn't a secret lab in the middle of Iowa where scientists genetically engineered batches of them at a time.

I pitched my cigarette away and stepped back into the room. Harry Jewell, a West Memphis homicide detective I'd worked with a few times before leaving the Memphis City Police to start my own private investigator's office, grunted and shook his head.

"Bad Luck Boyd," he said. "I reckon the poor bastard lived up to his name."

"You knew him?"

"Every cop in the Tri-State area knew him. Not a bad guy, really, but his name's always turning up in the Rolodexes of bookies and loan sharks."

"People have Rolodexes these days?

"In computers, then. Way I've heard it, the guy hasn't been on a winning streak since the first Bush was in the White House."

"We called him Wee Willie in high school," I said. "He was a runt but a tough runt, you know? Tried out for the football team in our freshman year and, Jesus, he couldn't have weighed more than a hundred fifteen pounds."

"How'd that work out?"

"He got knocked down a lot. Big guys loved to cream him."

"But he got up?"

"He got up, spitting blood and dirt, lowered his head, and tried again. He finally ended up with a broken collarbone and a concussion."

Short stories by Timothy Williams have previously appeared in several literary quarterlies, including the *Greensboro, Colorado,* and *Texas Reviews*; and his story "Something About Teddy" was selected for *Best American Mystery Stories 2004* (Houghton Mifflin). The author lives in western Kentucky, where he teaches English at a local college. This is his first contribution to *EQMM*. †

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Jewell shook his elephantine head and grimaced. "He ain't getting up this time. Bad Luck Boyd. The name fits," he said sourly. "Looks like a professional hit, doesn't it? One in the chest and one in the head, with a throwaway .22." Jewell had a coughing fit and wiped his lips on the back of his hand. "I'm taking this one personal, though. If the jerk had just shot Bad Luck once, I could have written this off as a suicide and been back in the office with a hot cup of coffee and a cheese Danish by now." He shook his head. "Why in God's name did Bad Luck drive across the bridge to get himself killed in my jurisdiction three weeks before I retire? And what in the hell are you doing here, Raines?"

"Willie was lying low over here, waiting for me to handle a problem. When I called his room a couple of times this morning and he didn't answer, I got worried and decided to check up on him."

"Oh yeah? Y'all were that close."

"Used to be."

Four days ago, Willie Boyd had walked into my office with change jingling in his pockets and a line of b.s. as long as an I-40 traffic jam trailing behind him. I'd heard bits of news and gossip about him over the years. Somehow Willie had managed to marry Linda Pate, a cheerleader and the dream girl of half the football team, the summer of our high-school graduation. That she'd settled on Willie seemed unbelievable. The fact that she hadn't left him was nothing short of a miracle. I'd heard stories of his gambling—Willie being banned from the casinos down in Tunica; Willie dropping hundreds at the dog track; Willie taking loans and blowing the money on college football, professional baseball, and boxing. But until four days ago, I hadn't really talked to him in twenty-four years.

"He was a client," Jewell said. "Wife cheating on him?"

"No," I said. "He needed protection."

Jewell's eyes twinkled. "Oh yeah? Looks like you did a real first-class job." He coughed and then wheezed that he was just joking. "Who wanted to scramble Bad Luck's eggs this time?"

"Ray Brady," I said. "Willie was into him for seventy-five thousand."

"Razor Ray Brady? Tell me you got something, Raines. Something that we could use to put that stone-cold psychopath away for good."

"I've got a tape," I said. "Willie wanted to wear a wire. He thought if he had Ray on tape threatening him it might buy him some time." I shook my head at Willie's wide-eyed, staring face. "Doesn't seem like it worked."

"Razor Ray, huh," Jewell said. "I'll be damned. Maybe old Bad Luck Boyd did me a favor after all."

After I left Willie Boyd's body to the West Memphis coroner's boys

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and his soul to whatever spirit looks after chronic gamblers and hustlers, I drove back across the bridge into Memphis and then south to Mississippi and the Boyds' two-story frame house just a few blocks from the neighborhood where Willie and I had grown up. With its green shutters and flecking paint and small yard, the house was indistinguishable from a dozen others on the block. Linda Pate had inherited the place from her mother twenty years ago, and as far as I knew, the house was the only thing Willie hadn't managed to gamble away.

Linda answered the door so quickly that I thought she'd been waiting. She wore jeans and a sweater, had her jet-black hair pulled into a ponytail. Despite a handful of wrinkles and the bags under her eyes, she was as beautiful as she'd been in high school. From the bleariness of her eyes and the blankness of her expression, I knew that her phone had already rung.

"Charlie," she said softly, as if it had only been a few days instead of a couple of decades since we'd last met. "Did you see him? He didn't suffer, did he?"

"No," I said. "It was quick."

She nodded solemnly and then stepped back to let me inside. The house was warm and comfortable with the smell of fresh-brewed coffee. I followed her to the kitchen and sat at the table while she filled two mugs and then stood still as if she'd momentarily forgotten what she was supposed to do next. She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and then turned around, a twitchy smile on her lips. She set my mug on the table and glanced at the refrigerator.

"There's caramel coffeecake if you'd like some." She frowned and shook her head. "I think there is, anyway. Eric's seventeen now and eats like a couple of full-grown elephants. But I can check."

"That's all right," I said.

"Willie loved peaches, so I always tried to keep a couple of cans cold for when he came in late and wanted a snack. Three-quarters of the time, though, Eric would beat him to them." She smiled. "Willie never complained. Not once. My dad would have hit the roof."

"I'm sorry," I said, thinking that it was the most inadequate phrase in the English language. "I did what I could, but it wasn't enough."

She stared into her coffee for a second. "We all did what we could for Willie and it was never enough. He couldn't help himself. He wanted to. You don't have any idea how bad he wanted to stop. Nights he'd come home and sit at the table and weep." She shook her head sadly. "He hated himself, Charlie. He never realized how good a man he was."

"And you did?"

"It wasn't easy sometimes. God, you have no idea what it's like

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to cringe every time the phone rings or someone knocks on the door. I've been too ashamed to look my mailman in the eye for the last ten years."

"Your mailman?"

"He knows how many final notices we've gotten, how many credit bureaus are chasing us. We've had three cars repossessed in the last five years." She smiled. "Willie even pawned my vacuum cleaner. He got twenty-five bucks and hit the quarter slot machines in Tunica. He won that night, came home with three hundred and eighty dollars, and swore it was a sign that his luck was changing. But of course it never did."

I asked how much Willie had told her about what was going on. Linda shrugged, traced the rim of her mug with a long red fingernail.

"Not a lot. He said that someone was threatening him and that he'd gone to you for help. Yesterday morning, he came in, packed an overnight bag, said he wanted to stay away from the house for a couple of days until you handled his problem. He said he didn't think Eric and I were in danger, but he didn't want to take the chance." This time her smile was wan and bitter. "He told me not to worry, everything would work out fine."

"I'm sorry," I said again.

"So what happened, Charlie? What was going on?"

I told her what I knew. A few days ago Willie had come to my office to ask a favor. He'd been on a hot streak, had left the dog track with close to five grand and then talked his way into a high-stakes craps game run by Ray Brady. The next thing Willie knew, it was six in the morning and he was seventy-five thousand dollars in the hole. Linda shuddered—at the size of the debt or the mention of Ray Brady or, most likely, at both. I didn't tell her that Razor Ray Brady was the biggest and meanest of Memphis's non-Sicilian bookies, pimps, and extortionists, or that he'd earned his nickname during his days as an enforcer for the Dixie Mafia, or that there were at least two dozen men walking around Memphis who resembled the title character in *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* thanks to Ray's fondness for straight razors. I could tell from the look on her face that I didn't have to. Ray had been one grade ahead of us at Southaven High. He'd been a tall, husky kid with chronic acne and shifty eyes, and he'd been dangerous even back then. Ray sold pot and speed, pulled smash-and-grab jobs on the weekends, beat younger boys for their lunch money and the sheer pleasure of the act.

"I stopped by one of Ray's clubs to talk with him, but he had me thrown out as soon as I mentioned Willie's name. Then Willie suggested that he wear a wire so we could get Ray on tape threatening him. He called it an insurance policy. Afterwards, I called Ray, warned him that I had the tape and if anything happened to

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Willie it was going to the police. Evidently he didn't listen."

She closed her eyes. "Did you turn the tape over to the police?"

"A West Memphis homicide detective has it." I glanced at my watch. "I'd say they were picking up Ray for questioning about now."

"Thank God," she said.

"If you need anything . . ." I said.

She shook her head. "We'll survive," she said. "Eric and I will get by. Willie knew that." Then she stood and dumped the remains of her coffee down the drain. "I've got to get on with the business of doing that, Charlie. I've got phone calls to make and Eric will be home from school soon. There are a million things to do."

I stood and kissed her cheek. On my way out of the kitchen, I turned to look back at her. Linda had sat down at the table, her head in her hands. She looked as if she might never move again.

By the time I made it to my office on Union, the rain was coming down harder and the wind gusting. The forecast called for temperatures to drop into the thirties, with freezing rain possible before morning. I killed the engine, stepped out into the rain, pulled my coat tighter against the wind, trying to shrug off the nagging feeling that something about Willie's murder didn't make sense. I was still trying when a black Lincoln pulled to a stop at the curb and splashed my ankles with water. The passenger's door opened and a large blockheaded guy with a broad and grinning face stepped out.

"You want to take a ride with us, Mr. Raines?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so, Mickey. It's been a long day."

"Hey, Charlie," Mickey Neal said. "That wasn't a question, okay. Ray wants to talk with you."

"He knows where my office is."

Mickey shook his big head. "Please, Charlie. Let's make this easy, okay? Just come talk with Ray."

Thirty minutes later, we pulled off Brooks Road and into the parking lot of the Bottom's Up Gentleman's Club, a barnlike building with darkened windows and a flashing neon sign that promised the prettiest girls in Memphis. Razor Ray Brady ran a quarter of the illegal book in town, owned a half-dozen bars, a few bowling alleys, and a dry-cleaning franchise, but he spent three-quarters of his time in the strip bar, perched on a stool with a half-dozen G-string-wearing dancers on his arm. Ray claimed he liked the ambiance. I figured it had more to do with the fact that back in school, Ray had been a pimple-ridden freak who couldn't even convince his own sister to be his date at the senior prom.

Mickey Neal led me past the bouncers, the half-dressed waitresses, and glass-eyed patrons into a roped-off private room. Ray Brady sat at a small, round table with a bottle of bourbon, a ciga-

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rette burning in an ashtray, and a thin, semi-nude brunette by his side. Time had cured his acne, but Ray was still an odd-looking guy—tall and gangly and hard-boned. Looking at him, I thought of a six foot six inch spider.

"You want a drink?" Ray asked as I sat down.

"No thanks," I said. "What's shaking, Ray?"

He leaned forward, elbows on the table. "You know what's shaking, Charlie. I spent two hours of my afternoon in a West Memphis police station that smelled like B.O. and Old Spice, thanks to you and your freak pal, Willie Boyd."

"I warned you that if anything happened to Willie the tape would go to the cops. You never struck me as a dumb guy before, Ray. But maybe I was wrong."

He poured two fingers of bourbon into his glass, downed it, and then poured himself a double this time. "Listen to me, Raines. I don't know what you think was going on, but your pal Willie was a nut. He came here a couple of days ago babbling about seventy-five grand. I tell him to get out of my face, okay? I tell him he's freaking crazy. All right, maybe I have a bouncer pitch him out and warn him not to come back. That's the last I hear of Bad Luck Boyd until that fat detective picks me up today on suspicion." He held up his hands. "I swear to God."

"You've got a good lawyer. Tell him your story."

"I did, and he reamed that fat Arkansas detective a new one, but something ain't right here, Charlie. Someone's setting me up. Given the fact that you and Willie Boyd seemed to be best buddies, I started thinking it might be you."

"You should have given him time, Ray."

"Time?" Brady said. "What are you talking about, Charlie? You got cotton in your ears? Willie Boyd didn't owe me any money. You think I'd be stupid enough to front a line of credit to a deadbeat degenerate gambler like Bad Luck Boyd? The reason I threw him out of here was because we got a history, you know? We had a run-in over a personal matter a couple of years back. I think it's over with, but about a week ago he comes in here half drunk, starts screaming at me, waving a gun around."

"You're crazy," I said.

He laughed. "Right. That little runt comes in here waving an unloaded gun in my face and I'm the crazy one."

"What happened?"

"I took his gun away, found out it wasn't loaded, slapped him upside the head, pitched him and his frigging gun out the front door." He refilled his glass. "You'd think that would be the end of it, right? But no. Couple of days ago he comes in here babbling about seventy-five grand. Then you call me warning me if anything happens to Willie a tape's going to the police." He gulped his whiskey, let his breath out in a rush. "Now, I'm giving you a warn-

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ing. I don't know what's going on, but you don't want to play games with me, Charlie. If you don't believe that, drive up to Millington, pay a visit to a guy named Ron Tompkins who tried to get cute with me a few years back. Way I heard it described, his face looks like hamburger that's been run over by a pickup truck."

After Willie Boyd's funeral, a few dozen friends and family members gathered at the Boyds' house, their cars parked along the curb, in the drive, and in the weedy and soggy yard. The funeral had been quiet and concise. There were no wails of grief, no moans or sobs. Willie's son Eric sat in the front row of the church looking grim and determined in a suit that seemed a couple of sizes too small. Linda Boyd sat beside him, holding his hand. I didn't spot a teary eye in the entire crowd. In my days on the force, I'd attended a lot of services for a lot of murder victims, but Willie Boyd's funeral felt like none of them. The atmosphere that hung over the small Baptist church wasn't one of shock or outrage or horror but one of relief, as if Willie Boyd had spent years suffering from a terminal disease.

Now, a bleary-eyed woman with hairspray-stiff hair and deep wrinkles greeted me at the door and led me into a living room crowded with red-faced, middle-aged men and women balancing paper plates heaped with sliced ham, fried chicken, potato salad, and rolls. The woman patted my shoulder absently and told me to help myself to something to eat. It was only after she'd slipped away that I realized she was Willie's aunt Theresa. When Willie and I were in high school, I'd been half in love with her and spent torturous afternoons staring out of Willie's bedroom window at his aunt and his mother sunbathing in the backyard. For a second it seemed impossible that the wrinkled, weary woman crawling towards her seventies could be Theresa Parrish. Then I happened to catch a glimpse of myself in a hall mirror—receding hairline, hollow eyes, and beer gut—and I knew it wasn't impossible at all.

The kitchen was warm and cheery despite the occasion, the table piled with baked ham and turkey, platters of fried chicken and cold cuts, bowls of mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, green beans, and collard greens. Apple pies, peach and blackberry cobblers, and chocolate cake lined the counters, and there were gallons of coffee and tea and coolers filled with soft drinks and beer. Linda Boyd leaned against the stove, her smile tight and thin, her eyes wary. I hugged her and she patted my back, told me to help myself to something to eat or to a beer, and then excused herself to go lie down. I grabbed a bottle of Sam Adams, passed a few words with people I vaguely remembered from my childhood, and then went back to the living room.

People were telling Willie Boyd stories. I listened for a while and then tuned out when I realized that all of the stories of Willie's

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good humor, his determination, his practical jokes took place when he was a kid or a teenager. It was as if the real Willie Boyd, the one that people wanted to remember, anyway, had died the day he graduated from high school and we were holding his wake twenty-four years too late. I was guilty of that, too. The memory that I kept replaying was of Wee Willie dragging himself onto the football field in suffocating heat, ignoring the ridicule of the coaches and the players, to spend a couple of hours being pounded by two-hundred-and-sixty-pound morons who thought there was no better sport than unloading on an undersized but determined kid who wanted to be one of them. Thinking about it depressed me, so I finished my Sam Adams and decided to head for home. Before I could get up, a balding man with a beer gut and a thick brush moustache hauled a chair beside me and asked how I was doing these days. It took a minute for me to recognize him as Buck Greenwood, Willie's best friend in high school.

"Shame that something like this has to happen for people to see each other again," he said.

I agreed that it was, asked questions about his family, and answered questions about my own. Buck said he'd heard I was a private detective. I admitted that it was true.

"Just like Magnum P.I., huh?" he asked.

I said sure, except the surfing was lousy in Memphis, I drove a 1985 Firebird, and Magnum got a hell of a lot more girls. Buck laughed and handed me a business card.

"Insurance is my game," he said. "Home, auto, health, and life."

I thanked him for his card and prepared myself to deflect a sales pitch. But it didn't come. Instead, Buck shook his balding head and sighed deeply.

"Poor old Willie," he said. "God forgive me for saying it, but Linda and Eric are going to be better off without him."

He went on to say that it couldn't have been easy for them. The casinos were bad. Willie had outstanding markers in nearly every casino in Tunica. But the bookies were worse. In the last ten years, Willie had maxed a dozen credit cards, took short-term loans on their cars and then defaulted on them all. I told him I'd heard as much, and tried to think of an excuse to get away from him.

"Only thing they owned free and clear was this house," he said. "Linda inherited it from her mom. Then Willie took a mortgage on the place six months ago. Seventy-five thousand from one of those semi-legal outfits that charge four times the bank's interest rates. I told him he was crazy."

I sat up a little straighter. "Seventy-five thousand?"

"That's right," he said. "I told him just because they were willing to loan him half the house's value didn't mean he needed to take the money. God forgive me for saying it, but maybe everything worked out for the best. At least now, Linda and Eric will still

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have a roof over their heads."

"Willie had a life-insurance policy," I said.

"Half a million dollars." He nodded his head sagely. "You ask me, it was the smartest thing he ever did."

Then he sighed and shook his head and went for a fresh beer. I said my goodbyes. Outside, I stopped at the front door. A black Lincoln idled at the curb on the far side of the street. Ray Brady leaned against the rear fender, his head bent forward as he talked with Linda. Ray said something but she shook her head and stepped away from him. He glanced at me, scowling. Then Linda hurried back across the street and Ray's shoulders sagged; he climbed back into the car, and sped away.

Linda grimaced and averted her eyes when she approached me. Then she stopped with her hand on the door.

"He said he wanted to give me his condolences," she said.

"Well," I said. "Ray's always been a special kind of guy. You could call the police, tell them he's been bothering you."

She shook her head. "There's no point."

"I could talk with him."

"Just let it be, Charlie. He won't come back again."

Then she smiled and crossed her fingers and hurried back inside. I thought two things almost simultaneously: Linda looked guilty, and she was beautiful when she smiled.

The next morning I woke with a world-class hangover and a phone ringing in my ear. I snared the phone on the third ring, grimaced at a lightning bolt of pain behind my eyes. After I'd left Linda's house, the nagging feeling that she had lied to me about her conversation with Ray Brady and the troublesome grating in my head that had started while Buck Greenwood was talking about life insurance wouldn't leave me alone. Like the Einstein I am, I decided the best way to quiet what was bothering me was to drown it with Budweiser and Jim Beam. Now I growled a hello and winced when Harry Jewell's voice boomed in my ears.

"We got him," he said. "You believe it? We got the son of a buck dead in the water. Let's see if his smarmy lawyer can get him out of this."

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Nearly noon," Jewell said. "It doesn't matter what time it is. I'm looking at a lab report right here on my desk. Want to guess whose prints were on the .22 that killed Bad Luck Boyd?"

"Ray's," I said.

"Give the man a cigar," he said. "Way it looks, Brady put the gun in Willie's hand, fitted his finger on the trigger, and fired. But he got sloppy. We got four clean compares. Razor Ray's going to take the fall. In fact, he's in the backseat of a squad car as we speak."

I sat up in bed, tried to wipe the sleep from my eyes. "He put the

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gun in Willie's hand? Why would he do that to shoot him twice?"

"I'm figuring he shot Bad Luck in the chest, missed his heart by a couple of inches, and then forced the gun into Boyd's hand for the final shot in the head."

"That doesn't make sense, either. Why would he go to the trouble?"

"Who knows? Maybe he got a kick out of forcing Boyd to do it. Guys like Ray Brady aren't exactly normal."

"Maybe," I said. "How many murders you think Ray's responsible for?"

"A dozen at least, probably more."

"But there's never been a real piece of evidence to tie him to any of them. He's slick and he's a professional. Doesn't it seem odd that he'd be careless enough to leave his prints on the gun and leave the gun at the scene? This is almost too easy."

"Look," Jewell said, and sighed. "You're driving down the highway at sixty miles an hour and a big old rattlesnake crawls right out in the middle of the lane. Maybe you're the kind of guy who stops and wastes half an hour pondering why the thing was dumb enough to crawl out of its hole. What I do is gun the engine and run right over its head. See what I'm saying?"

I did and I told him so. But as I rolled out of bed and stumbled towards my coffeepot, the certainty that something was wrong wouldn't leave me alone. Razor Ray Brady was a lot of things—a lowlife, a psychopath, and a stone-cold killer—but he was also very good at what he did. Professional killers didn't make amateur mistakes, not when they were as smart, as ruthless, and as successful as Ray Brady. I filled a mug with coffee and lit a cigarette and told myself it didn't matter. Maybe Ray had been distracted, maybe Willie had pushed his buttons so hard that he hadn't been thinking straight. Maybe, I thought, Ray had a secret wish to be caught, a hidden bit of conscience that demanded he be punished for his crimes. Sure, I thought. Then I dumped my coffee into the sink and headed out the door.

Linda Boyd looked tired and haggard and every bit forty-two years old. With the mourners and well-wishers gone, the house seemed empty and quiet and lifeless.

"Is Eric home?" I asked.

She blew on her coffee before taking a sip. "He wanted to go back to school. I told him he didn't have to, but I didn't stop him." She sighed. "Maybe if I'd known how quiet it would be here without him I would have made him stay home."

"They arrested Ray Brady this morning."

She looked away and then asked if she could have a cigarette. I lit it for her, watched her take a deep drag and grimace.

"That man belongs in jail, Charlie."

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"Yes, he does," I said. "But not for killing Willie." I reached for her hand. "Why didn't you leave him, Linda?"

"Because I loved him," she said as if it should have been self-evident. "And he was sick, Charlie, really ill. If you love someone, you don't leave him when he gets sick with cancer or Parkinson's or something. You stay and you do the best you can, even if it isn't easy."

I nodded and squeezed her hand softly. "Those are terminal diseases, aren't they?"

"So is gambling," she said.

"Then Willie's death could be seen as a mercy killing. But how did you set up Brady for your husband's murder? I don't understand how you pulled it off unless you and Ray were working together and you double-crossed him.

She jerked her hand away and grimaced. "I didn't murder my husband," she said. "And you're right. Ray Brady didn't, either, but he's a wicked man, Charlie. A couple of years ago Willie lost money he didn't have on a college basketball tournament. Ray held the markers and was threatening to hurt him, so I went to see Ray about it. I knew he liked me in high school and I thought he might listen." She gave me a bitter, angry smile. "He listened. Then he said he'd take it out in trade." She shivered. "I slept with him for a month. When I finally told him I couldn't do it anymore, couldn't stand it, he beat me and raped me. Willie swore he'd get even." She stood from the table, went to a kitchen drawer, and pulled out a cassette tape. "You need to listen to something."

I followed her into the living room and sat on a sofa while she hunkered in front of a stereo and put on the tape. After a brief hum, Willie Boyd's voice filled the living room.

"Hey, Charlie," he said. "You must have been asking the right questions. Congratulations. I always knew you were a smart guy, and decent, too. You always stuck up for your friends, Charlie. That's why I knew I could count on you."

"Wee Willie," I said, shaking my head. "He always had a line."

"Shut up," Linda said, surprising me by the harshness of her tone. "Just listen to the tape."

"All right, Charlie. Here's the deal. I got myself in a bind. Another run of bad luck in a lifetime of them, huh? I don't know. I try and try to stop, but I can't do it. Not for Linda or Eric or even myself." There was a cough and then the sound of Willie gulping a drink. "Doesn't matter now. Eric's college fund is gone, there are beggars in Calcutta who've got better credit ratings than we do, and the bank is thirty days away from foreclosing on our house. I'm not trying to bore you with our problems, but I want you to see. This was the only way. With the life-insurance policy, the house will be safe and Eric will get a free ride to college. They'll be okay." Another cough and then the flick of a cigarette lighter. "I

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never could quit anything, Charlie. Not cigarettes or booze or betting on long shots. It's like the wires got crossed in my head. Anyway, here's the thing. The life insurance will take care of my family. But the policy won't pay on a suicide."

"And that's where I came in," I said.

"So that's why you're here," Willie said on the tape. "I needed insurance for my insurance, you know? Someone who would help finger Ray Brady for my murder. And you want to know how I feel about setting up Ray? It couldn't happen to a nicer guy. Ask Linda to tell you about Ray if she hasn't already. Or if that ain't enough for you, go talk to a few people Ray and his goons have pushed around." There was another cough. "So there you have it, Charlie. Think it over and I know you'll do the right thing." A laugh. "You might say I'm betting on it."

And then the tape and Willie Boyd fell silent forever. Linda looked at me, twisting the wedding band on her finger.

"The night before he killed himself we went to the Rendezvous for dinner and took a walk along the river and then we came home and made love. It was wonderful. It was like it was when we first married, back when we thought the world was ours for the taking. I didn't want to let him go. I told him it wouldn't work, that the police would figure it out. But Willie said he would make it work." When she looked up at me her eyes blazed. "And that's exactly what he did."

"He pulled the trigger twice," I said.

She nodded with a grim and defiant pride. "People always underestimated him. Back in school you all called him Wee Willie as if he was a sideshow freak instead of a boy. Then people started calling him Bad Luck Boyd like he was born to be a loser. To hell with all of you. Deep down inside, where it counts, Willie was always a winner. My husband was a hell of a man."

It was my turn to close my eyes, trying to imagine the effort it must have taken Willie to hold on to the gun after the first shot seared his chest and then to lift the barrel to his head and squeeze the trigger again. I thought of him on that football practice field being knocked down and picking himself up over and over again. And what about Ray Brady? Calling him an innocent man would have bordered on the ridiculous. I thought of the girls he pimped from his clubs, the women he'd beaten and raped, the faces he'd slashed with razors, the corpses he'd strewn across three states. For twenty-five years, Ray Brady had been on a winning streak, but it was about to end.

"You're right," I told Linda. "Willie was a hell of a man."

On the tape Willie had said he was betting that I would do the "right" thing. As I left the Boyds' house for the last time, I wasn't sure that I'd call framing a man for murder the "right" thing to do. But I knew that for once, Willie Boyd's luck had held. ●

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DEATH CONQUERS ALL

by Robert S. Levinson

"You come back, you'll be arrested for murder. Trial. Prison. Maybe the death penalty. Everything you've avoided all these years." I told this to Alain De Guerre, but the Frenchman rejected my well-meant reminder the way France turns its back on almost everything American besides jazz, beautiful women, and Woody Allen. And Jerry Lewis, still, I suppose.

I told this to Alain De Guerre and he said, "*Oui,* but I must, Neil. When I have explained everything to you, you will understand. You will help me. You will be so glad you did. We will collaborate and you will have an even better book than the one that became my brilliant film."

"Brilliant, but it wasn't my novel, Alain, not when you got through with it, not *The Fatty Arbuckle Affair.*"

"So brilliant, then why did the jury at Cannes choose instead a putrid piece of overripe dog poop by, by—? I cannot bring myself to say his name even, Neil." The wonder man of the French cinema sighed and went silent for a moment, then, "If there had been no book by Neil Gulliver, there would be no film for me to realize. Your work, my old friend. I, merely humbled to bring it to the silver screen in all its glory."

I visualized him with a hand at his heart, bowing his head in false humility.

I said, "Your screenplay, rewriting Fatty as a woman? A *woman,* Alain?"

"Not any woman. *The* woman. Deneuve. Deneuve was available.

Robert Levinson's latest novel, *Ask a Dead Man* (Five Star), drew this praise at the end of a starred review in *Publishers Weekly*! "This is a dense, dark, beautifully wrought tale of love and betrayal, sin and retribution, offering serious suspense, terrific twists, and full-blooded characters. Levinson may not have an Irish name, but he carries the soul of the Irish poets in his pen and in his heart—only a dead man wouldn't relish this read." ✝

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Who dares say no to casting Deneuve? Directing Deneuve? A favorite even of the lamented M. Truffaut. *Le Dernier Métro? Le Dernier Métro,* Neil." Truffaut's name, said like a god. The film title cited like a fresh Commandment down from Heaven.

"Soaking wet, Deneuve weighed less than one of Fatty Arbuckle's thighs."

He discredited my comment with an indecipherable noise. "You exaggerate, Neil. We did not show Deneuve's thighs at all, not even in Deneuve's scenes with Adjani."

"The scenes that weren't anywhere in my novel, those scenes, Alain?"

"Neil, Neil, Neil . . . What is fiction if not an excuse to present the truth as it should be? Can you come get me at the airport? Or, a limousine? A stretch with the wet bar, maybe? Your bosses at the newspaper, they still give you a fat expense account, is so?"

I sighed and said, "You didn't hear me a minute ago, Alain? You're on every airport list of wanted felons—"

"*Non, non, non . . . Accused* wanted felon."

"You'll be recognized and arrested the second you set foot on U.S. soil."

"I will be disguised, traveling on falsified papers, but you're right to be concerned for me. I will instead enter from Canada. Better safety than sorrow."

There was no dissuading him.

I said, finally, "Give me one good reason now why any of this makes sense."

"Jean Harlow," he said without hesitation.

"Jean Harlow?"

"The Platinum Blonde Bombshell. The great icon of the silver screen many years before the great Marilyn."

"I know who Jean Harlow is, Alain."

"But *The Jean Harlow Affair,* yet to be written . . . You know of her husband, also, who they say committed suicide three days after their marriage?"

"Paul Bern."

"*Oui.* Only this Paul Bern, he did not commit suicide, as always believed, *mon ami.* I have done my work home. This Paul Bern, he was murdered."

"Rumored and written about for years, Alain. Like the one about him supposedly being shot by his ex-wife, Dorothy Millette, who appeared out of nowhere after several years and—"

"A distraction. A bit player walking through a scene. But I have found out the *real* truth. This Paul Bern, he was murdered by—" He laid in a long pause. "Paul Bern was murdered by—" Again, a pause. "Jean Harlow herself." Revealed like the climax of an Agatha Christie novel, as if he expected me to swoon at the revelation.

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I said, "Clearly, you don't need me to write your fiction, Alain."

"The real truth has been buried for years. Also the evidence of what I'm telling you."

"I suppose you know where that is?"

"Yes. Why else am I preparing to risk everything and come to America? You will help me to get the evidence. You will expose the truth to the world in your newspaper, then you will write *The Jean Harlow Affair* and I will realize the film."

"I see now where this is going, Alain. You'll get caught. You'll go on trial. Your lawyers will get you off by pleading insanity."

"And to play Jean Harlow in our film—"

"Let me guess . . . Jean-Paul Belmondo."

"Too old, and also the same, alas, for Alain Delon, for whom I was named after by my sainted mother. *Non, mon ami,* as *Le Blonde Bombshell* I see your wonderful and beautiful ex-wife, the gifted Stephanie Marriner, the once-upon-a-time sex queen of the soap operas, which I watched like my religion after they began on our television."

A week later, shortly before nine o'clock, the evening sky darkly sinister, only a quarter moon to show for the hour, I was waiting for Alain inside the Global Bus terminal in Pasadena, where movie studio press agents once staged their celebrity arrivals. This was before TV, when theater newsreels were a main source of publicity and the station's hacienda motif made for a far more colorful backdrop than the main terminal twenty minutes away in downtown L.A., on the cusp of Skid Row. The terminal was empty, except for eight or ten people who were also waiting out the bus and a collection of bums sleeping it off on corner benches, their shopping carts piled high with life on the streets, the smell of their cheap whiskey clouding the room and scraping my nostrils raw.

I passed the time reflecting on Jean Harlow and Paul Bern, weeding out fantasies from the facts surrounding the MGM producer's death on July 5, 1932, three days after he'd wed the Platinum Blonde under the approving eyes of studio genius Irving Thalberg and Thalberg's own glittering star of a wife, Norma Shearer.

Harlow is away overnight from their Benedict Canyon cottage, visiting with her mother.

In the morning, Bern's naked body is discovered by the butler, lying facedown in front of a full-length mirror in the bathroom of the white-walled master bedroom, reeking of Harlow's favorite perfume, Mitsouko. A bullet through his head. A .38-caliber pistol by his side.

The butler, panicked, phones MGM instead of calling the police.

In no time, Thalberg arrives with studio boss Louis B. Mayer

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and Mayer's publicity chief and principal henchman, Howard Strickling. Strickling phones for police after Mayer discovers a handwritten suicide note of apology to Harlow:

Dearest Dear,

Unfortunately this is the only way to make good the frightful wrong I have done you and to wipe out my abject humiliation. I love you.

Paul

You understand that last night was only a comedy.

Case closed, or was it as simple as that?

So open and shut?

What new truth did Alain De Guerre believe he had discovered?

What evidence did he think he'd found that made worthwhile his risking capture by this trip to Hollywood?

The squeal of brakes signaled the arrival of Alain's bus. I moved outside and drank in the fresh air while searching for him among the dozen or so passengers who stepped onto the arrival platform and did some combination of stretch and yawn, greet and hug, and watchful wait while the driver unloaded luggage from the undercarriage.

Alain wasn't among them, or so it appeared until I reacted to tapping on my shoulder and turned around to confront a man clutching a fat gym bag, in a rumpled black suit and matching skullcap, barely any face showing past Coke-bottle glasses and a salt-and-pepper bush of a beard stretching down six or eight inches from an off-center bulb of a nose broken once too often.

That nose was the giveaway. It had been broken three times that I was aware of. Tabloid stuff. Once by the husband of some young actress who wound up on his cutting-room floor; once by the young actress, following the film's premiere at the Venice Film Festival; once, after it had healed, by Alain's late wife, within hours of her learning from the tabloids about her husband and the young actress.

I said, "Alain?"

He pressed a finger to his lips. "Lower your voice, *mon ami.* They may be on to me." His eyes did a quiet dance, signaling me to check behind, to my right. A couple in their mid to late seventies, suitcases in hand, seemed to be studying us. "They have looked suspicious since they boarded behind me, like they knew better than my disguise." The couple headed in our direction slowly, each step a seeming adventure in pain. "Quickly. Where is your car?"

"The parking lot. An old Jag." I rattled off the license plate number.

Alain's eyebrows rose. "A limousine, how nice it would have been right now for the getaway." He charged off hugging his gym bag to

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his chest, leaving me to deal with the elderly couple. They got to me and kept going, heading for a teenage kid with long hair, nose rings, and drooping jeans two sizes too large for his skinny-hipped frame; standing in the entrance with his arms raised apologetically, huffing and puffing an explanation: "Grandma, Gramps, so, like, sorry, really sorry. I got busted for speeding on the freeway. . . ."

"That was a close call," Alain said. He was crouched below see level in the backseat of the Jag. Until he spoke up, I'd feared he was in the parking lot, aiming for the wrong car or on the lam from Grandma and Gramps. I said so as I slid behind the wheel and sparked the ignition. Alain made a noise that sounded like a severe gas pain and, not entirely convinced, urged me to pay attention to my rearview for headlamps that wouldn't go away before changing the subject. "I confess, Neil, of having had hopes of you surprising me by bringing your ex-wife to help in welcoming me for our auspicious reunion," he said.

"Stevie's in the middle of Texas, on location for another twelve weeks, costarring with Clooney and Depp in a remake of *Giant.*"

"*Merde.* Nobody leaves good enough alone in Hollywood. They wanted me to remake *Breathless.* I smiled in their faces one at a time. I said, 'What would we call it? *Asthma?*' They looked at me like I am joking and laughed to win my favor, except the one vice president who reminded me of the first schoolgirl I ever kissed with my tongue. She thought it was a wonderful suggestion and that it would have special attraction for people suffering from asthma."

"Alain, you did direct *Asthma.*"

"The money, *mon ami.* At a time I had more debts than principles. Besides, I could bring my dear precious wife and live in the laps of luxury in Hollywood, in the Benedict Canyon, while mending our broken relationship."

"Instead, she was murdered and you were—"

"Neil!" He used my name to put a period to the subject. "The only murder bringing us now together is Paul Bern, by the hand of the legendary Blonde Bombshell, Jean Harlow," he said. "Do me the favor of paying attention to your driving, will you do that? I booked into the Renaissance Hotel, behind the Grauman's Chinese Theatre." He stretched out on the rear seat with his gym bag for a pillow and within minutes was asleep.

I snapped on the radio to KJAZ. With the jazz station as the soundtrack to my thoughts, I used the half-hour drive to Hollywood to reflect on rumors that had circulated at the time and in years since had gained strength, but not substantiation. Most began and ended with Mayer's man, Howard Strickling, loyal and powerful, known privately as "The Fixer" because of his ability to

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manipulate the government, the newspapers, and anybody and anything else, in the service of his boss.

So, no surprise that almost the first words from Alain when I met him the next morning were: "Howard Strickling, *mon ami.* You know his name, that villain?"

Alain was waiting for me outside the Renaissance Hotel, situated on the towering backside of the Hollywood & Highland shopping complex that surrounds Grauman's Chinese, constructed at a cost of six hundred million dollars to resemble—in true motion-picture kitsch—one of the colossal sets that had been built for D.W. Griffith's epic *Intolerance.* Alain clucked like a hen on speed and lamented that the closest France had come to so magnificent a creation was the Eiffel Tower and perhaps the Arc de Triomphe. He looked too serious to be joking.

"And the theater inside the Hollywood & Highland is where they now hold the awards ceremonies for the academy and the awards banquet afterwards," he said. Like I didn't know. "So many great films of mine and never one nomination, except one in foreign, and the winner something out of a garbage bucket by some director with an unpronounceable name from another of those laughable countries, whose subtitles were more interesting than anything photographed." Like I was supposed to agree.

I said, "Uh-huh, but going back to Howard Strickling. You called him a villain. Why was that, Alain?"

He adjusted his thick lenses and squinted at me under meshed eyebrows. "You think he's a savior because he protected Harlow in her moment of greatest need? A villain, more like it, the way he spit in the face of justice. One should not spit in the face of justice. Sins and sinners must be accounted for." His voice had risen enough to attract attention from tourists leaving the hotel under a load of cameras and backpacks. He stared them to a standoff until they'd all loaded onto a double-decker bus whose painted frame advertised:

"DEAD HOLLYWOOD COMES ALIVE"
THE TOUR EVERY BODY'S DYING TO TAKE

When I had his attention, I said, "Strickling protected Harlow how?"

"How else? From the gas chamber, of course. Or was it still the electric chair? You think he was named the Fix-It Man for nothing? For *something* Howard Strickling was named the Fix-It Man."

I expected to hear the old legends. How Harlow was there that night and it was she, not the butler, who put in a frantic call to the studio and Mayer. How Bern had returned home late and unexpected to discover his sweet bride, impatient with his inability to

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perform, in bed and kindling a romance with actor William Powell. How Harlow was visiting her "Mama Jean," and Bern's ex-wife, Dorothy Millette, had invaded the mansion, wielding the .38 and threatening to tell the world the Harlow marriage was invalid because, as opposed to an "ex," she and Bern had never divorced—leading to a demand for blackmail, a struggle, and the fatal shot. How Strickling, in the hours before he summoned police, had restaged the scene and caused a phony suicide note to be written. How he'd directed Jean's repugnant stepfather Marino Bello to ask Bello's gangster friend Bugsy Siegel to find and dispose of Dorothy Millette.

How whatever the truth was, the brilliant press agent had orchestrated the kind of follow-up that would not tarnish Harlow's reputation or career or marginalize her value at the box office to Louis B. Mayer. How it had all played out according to plan with the support of cops whose honesty wasn't as bankable as Strickling's payoffs.

Similar legends and contradictions had grown up around Marilyn and her suicide, which through the years had come to be a CIA kill caused by John F. Kennedy or Bobby Kennedy, take your pick; or a murder bought and paid for by their old man, Joe, and arranged by JFK's brother-in-law Peter Lawford, using underworld contacts he was steered to by Frank Sinatra.

Elvis, of course, was murdered, which didn't quite explain how he happened to still be alive after his fatal overdose at Graceland, and—

I didn't expect anything new from Alain, no matter how fiercely his egg-sized eyes shone with the conviction of a man who's seen the burning bush for himself.

He massaged his beard and sighed to the sky, as if I had flunked another test. "Come, I show you."

Alain sped off down the avenue toward Hollywood Boulevard, angled forward against a modest breeze, one hand clamped on his skullcap, covering ground like an Olympic sprinter who is not going to pass his test for steroids. He weaved through sidewalk traffic that grew fatter the closer we got to Grauman's Chinese, winning rude words where he wasn't quick enough to avoid banging a shoulder or bumping a thigh, few of the words in English.

I chased after him, gaining sweat and losing ground, even though my morning regimen for years has included a trot around Westwood, where I've lived in a condo since I was dumped in the name of true love, she said, by Ms. Stephanie Marriner, not long after Stevie was anointed "Sex Queen of the Soaps" by an entertainment media with an unyielding appetite for sex queens.

The Grauman's forecourt was buried under more than a hundred

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tourists taking pictures and testing against their own the hand- and footprints of favorites among the famous film stars past and present who had been stopping by to memorialize themselves in wet cement since an elf of a showman named Sid Grauman began the custom shortly before his movie palace opened its doors for the first time in 1927 with the world premiere of DeMille's silent version of *The King of Kings.*

The area was designed to resemble a King Kong-sized red pagoda. Dragon silhouettes played on the copper roof, while stone lion-dogs guarded the entrance to a lobby supported by red and gold columns, dotted with restored wall murals of life in the Orient under an immense, intricate chandelier of Chinese design.

Grauman, whose partners in the theater were the reigning royalty of Hollywood, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, hadn't set out to seal stardom in cement. The practice started after actress Constance Talmadge visited the construction site, and accidentally stepped onto a wet slab. In jest, she dedicated the slab to Sid and signed her name and—*kazam!*—a klieg light erupted over Grauman's head. Or so the legend goes.

Alain spent a few minutes on the outer sidewalk, hands forming a rectangle, as if he were framing the scene for a camera take, himself framed between Batman and someone dressed like some superhero from an X-Men movie, and not far from Wonder Woman and Superman, they and others paid by the theater to wear costumes, make nice-nice, and pose for photos with the tourists.

"This would not ever happen in France," Alain said, grunting distemper as he obeyed the command of a lantern-jawed guy in khaki shorts to move out of the picture he was trying to take of Batman with his arms wrapped suggestively around his elephantine wife, in an English spoken with a vaguely Germanic tint. "In France, wherever I go out in public, they are always begging to have their picture taken with me."

"But not with a rabbi," I said.

That reminded Alain that he was in disguise. He blew out a small hurricane of relief.

"There," he said, his index finger pointing to an area by the advertising windows on the west side of the forecourt. "There is where I have to show you." He hurried over, excusing his way past the clutters of people trying on the prints of Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson. He hovered over a striking blond teenager hanging out of a halter top while matching her elegant, finely-boned fingers against those in the oversized gray-tinted cement block of—

Jean Harlow.

When she cleared away, Alain quickly giant-stepped forward

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and took possession of the slab like a demonic landlord, shooing away everyone while urging me closer. "You see it now, *mon ami?*"

Harlow's memorial to herself read: "To Sid in sincere appreciation." Under her signature were her hand-prints and high-heeled footprints separated by a vertical row of three penny-sized depressions and under that the date, September 29, 1933.

"The holes were from the black pennies Jean inserted for good luck," Alain said. "Long missing. Long gone. Stolen by somebody no better than graverobbers." I gave him a *So what?* look. He dug out a folded sheet from a pocket and handed it over. It was a glossy photo of the Harlow slab. It won him another questioning look from me. "You think you see, but you do not see," he said.

I compared the photo to the slab.

There was a difference.

The Harlow slab in the photo had a different inscription: *To Sid Grauman, With Sincere Appreciation;* here hand and footprints, nothing more.

Alain ripped the photo away from me, refolded it, and jammed it back into his pocket. "Now you begin to see," he said, looking at me as if he expected an apology.

"What does this have to do with the death of Paul Bern?" I said, the question catching the attention of a few nearby tourists. Alain noticed. He took my sleeve and led me away, over Rex Harrison and Cary Grant, across Jeanne Crain and Natalie Wood, to a back area that gave us a rest bench and a modicum of privacy.

He checked for spies, then whispered, "The fine hand of Howard Strickling at work, Neil, *mon ami.*"

"I don't understand, Alain."

"Of course, but I cracked the puzzle; putting one and two together and getting four." He adjusted his glasses and nodded in self-accord. A flickered smile gave a momentary animation to his false beard. "The photo is of the block of cement Harlow truly, in fact, did before she murdered Paul Bern."

"Yes?"

"That terrible night, she summons Howard Strickling to her mansion. This is even before Mayer, anyone. *Merde.* Strickling recognizes the seriousness of what has happened. He sends Harlow on her way to her mother. He bribes the houseman, who will eventually disappear from the face of our planet, with a large sum of money from a bottomless pot of gold. He does the same with a studio person who writes a suicide note to his specifications. Fearing not all fingerprints will be safely removed, he calls one of his police or gangster connections and soon he has replaced the murder weapon with a .38-caliber pistol that will conveniently have only the prints of Paul Bern. And so on and so on. Now do you begin to understand where I have come from?"

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His eyes were beacons of anxiety.

"Tell me, so I'm certain."

"There is also a confessional note that Harlow has written before Strickling arrives on the scene. As with the true weapon of death, he has confiscated the note. But the Fix-It Man, like so many others, has respect for history and cannot entirely bring himself to destroy this evidence to the truth of what happened. He hides the evidence and, after a safe period of time, he hides it one more time, like a time capsule." He threw an accusing finger in the direction of the Harlow slab. "Under there. Strickling buried the truth under there."

He stamped a palm with his fist. His look challenged me to dispute the claim and carried a sense of growing desperation.

"Alain, how could that be?" I said, my mounting uneasiness about his behavior tempered by a newspaperman's natural curiosity.

"What a Fix-It Man does, Neil. He bribes Grauman. He bribes Jean Klossner, who is the true M. Footprint, a stonemason whose family worked for three generations helping to complete the Notre Dame cathedral, inventors of the wet cement that made—" tossing his arms away—"all this possible. In dark of night at the theater's forecourt, under a tent of secrecy guarded by police of Strickling's choosing, in the company of Strickling and Jean Harlow, Monseiur Klossner broke out the old cement, then removed himself, at Strickling's request, until Strickling could dig down deep enough into the soft earth to place a strongbox in which were the .38 and the confessional note Harlow had written. He smothered the box in the dirt, whereupon Klossner returned and caused the new cement block to be created by Harlow. The hands. The high-heels. But Harlow, she got the inscription wrong and, too quick for Strickling to prevent, she inserted the black pennies."

Alain grew quiet, his hands folded palms up in his lap, and surveyed the passing parade. A smile lit his lips. "I can smell fresh popped corn soaking in the butter, Neil. I love it, the fresh buttered popped corn. The smell. The taste." He kissed his fingertips and threw them away. "A *cinéaste's* true aphrodisiac. My beloved wife, Gilly, and I, we would have it when we attended the cinema. No matter where. I would like some before we leave, the taste on my lips to remind me of our mission when we come back here, *oui?*"

"Our mission?"

"Yours and mine. They will let us inside for the popcorn? A large-size box. My treat." He went for his billfold.

I stopped his hand. "Exactly what is our mission, Alain?"

"I have said already, *mon ami.* . . . To uncover the truth."

Alain allowed me to pry myself loose from him only after I had

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promised to return at nightfall with the supplies we'd need. "And two shovels, especially," he said, repeating himself endlessly about the shovels. "Two shovels, one for you, one for me, so we dig two times as fast, before we are maybe seen by *gendarmes* and must go on the run." He remained obsessed with the shovels until we parted at the hotel, when he chased after me in the underground garage to request: "And an axe for use to crack the cement into pieces we can quickly discard in reaching our goal."

"Already on our list, Alain."

He decided he needed to see the list again. He studied it intently, like a student preparing for finals. *"Ah, bien. Très bien.* Good, good, good. Two axes, one for me and one for you, also to work swiftly, like with the shovels. We will begin after the last screenings, after the workers all depart and the theater goes empty and dark, *oui?"*

"An excellent plan, Alain."

I'd have agreed to two hookers driving tanks down the boulevard if he'd asked, anything to help get me away now from behavior increasingly bordering on the bizarre. I was not going to be party to any dig at Grauman's Chinese, of course. That was not the issue confronting me. The issue was what to do about Alain De Guerre; how to keep him from going through with his crazy scheme.

I was no sooner behind the wheel of the Jag and turning the key than he was rapping on the window, shoving his face into the opening the instant the glass lowered, beard glistening with sweat, to say, "Are we better off using a drill like the drill they use on streets when they are replacing the asphalt?"

I said, "Excellent thought, Alain. I'll add them to the list."

"Also, a torch, one for you and one for me? You agree?"

And one for the little boy who lives down the lane?

"Yes. The drills and the torches, both. Better safe than sorry."

He said, "Perfect, yes. Two to the list. Two, like the axe and the shovel. The shovel, the kind that are like gravedigger shovels, Neil. We are doing that, are we not? Like gravediggers? Raising a corpse, not laying a corpse to rest; exhuming the body of a tragic crime to once and for eternity reveal the truth."

I gunned the motor.

A second time.

He smiled at that and stepped away from the car, still giving me instructions, his rapid-fire speech a sputter of confusion, barely understandable as more of it came in French. I glided from the parking slot. Easing toward the garage exit, I caught Alain in the rearview, his arms airborne, fingers raised in what was a Churchillian "V for Victory" or a last reminder about the two shovels, the two axes . . .

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Halfway home, I swung off Sunset and trailed down into Beverly Hills, to a shop on Little Santa Monica Boulevard, M. Berman's Gallery of Greatness, which I often visited when doing research on Hollywood history. The proprietor, Murray, a man in his mid to late sixties, had more minutiae stored in memory than the Internet. He didn't let me down after I'd described the two Harlow cement squares, the one in the ground at Grauman's Chinese and the one in the Alain De Guerre photograph.

"Both authentic," Murray said, before I could ask the question. "Now I suppose you want to know how that can be?" he said, and at once launched into an explanation. "Howard Strickling wanted to make Jean's ceremony stand out from any of the others when he started to promote the movie *Dinner at Eight,* so Strickling arranged with Grauman to have it conducted on the theater stage, in front of an audience paying for the privilege of seeing Harlow in the flesh. First time it was ever done that way, and the last.

"The cement maven, Klossner, and his assistants wheel out the framed slab of wet cement on a flatbed dolly and move it onto the floor. She does her thing with the handprints, the shoes, the signature. So far, so good." There were glasses of freshly brewed tea and a bowl of sugar cubes on the antique table between our armchairs in the conversation area. Murray stuck a cube between his teeth and, after giving his glass several stirs, tilted back his head for a healthy rinse and swallow. He signaled me to try it that way and continued: "Now comes the problem. Klossner's cement dried faster than usual. While the assistants are lifting the slab back onto the dolly, it splits down the middle. Half falls out of the frame, drops onto the floor, and smashes to bits. Gone. Finished. Destroyed. So, four days later, the ceremony is repeated outside in the forecourt, the way it should've been done in the first place, and that's the one that's there, except for the pennies Harlow put in for good luck. So much for good luck." Another swallow. "What else, Neil? You've been holding something back from me. I can tell."

I sprang Alain De Guerre's theory on him, but made it my own.

Murray gripped his belly in place while his jowls danced to the music of his laughter. He could not get words past an asthmatic wheeze until the lubrication set in from an inhaler he kept nearby.

"I were a betting man, I'd bet there's nothing under Harlow's block but the good earth that was there when Grauman built the Chinese to go with his Egyptian Theatre up the boulevard and the Million Dollar in downtown L.A.," he said. "Makes for a good story, but too risky even for a Howard Strickling." Another spritz. "The one I always liked? The one about Bern catching her in bed with Bill Powell, and Powell wrestles the gun away from Bern and *Kaboom!* Then, in comes Strickling to fix things up with the cops,

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City Hall, the press. Everything that never happened for the French director Alain De Guerre, remember? When Gillian Lance was shot dead a few years ago and De Guerre was indicted for murder and went running back to France, where they've always refused to extradite him because of the death penalty here?" He looked at me strangely. "What's suddenly up with you, Neil? I say, something wrong?"

Murray's observation had brought me back from the dreamland of Alain De Guerre's out-of-control imagination. I grew increasingly nervous on the drive home, stung by the truth of the situation I had allowed Alain to lead me into. I was harboring a fugitive from justice; aiding and abetting. A D.A. bent on headlines and videotape at eleven could stretch the charges against me to include accessory to murder.

For his well-being and my own, I had to figure a way to stop Alain from night-crawling at Grauman's Chinese and get him on a bus, a train, or a plane out of the country.

That was what? Aiding and abetting a flight to avoid prosecution?

How many years would that get me?

Maybe the judge would be compassionate, go easy.

The phone stopped ringing and the answering machine had taken over by the time I got inside my apartment. Alain. Sounding frantic. Saying, "I've run out of counting the times I have rung you up, *mon ami.* Where are you? We have new arrangements to discuss. Call me, call me, call me. *Oui?* Yes? How you say, *Okay?* I am waiting, damn you, Neil. Damn you, damn you, damn you."

I rewound the machine and hit playback. His were a dozen of the fifteen messages, his voice growing increasingly strident, requests turning into demands, whines into tears of anguish at my failure to respond. All of them dealt with either his need for confirmation on the specific time we would be meeting or the idea that we should include a wooden mallet and slender chisel in our arsenal of attack weapons.

"I do not wish to destroy her block, and we can be most diligent with the mallets and the chisels," went one of them. Two of them. Three of them. "But the shovel, the drill, all that we put on the list, bring them as well," went another of them. Two of them. Three of them. "We are like Columbus tonight, making a great discovery for the ages," he decided. "We empty the world of another lie," he decided.

Once, he wondered if my ex was good in bed, explaining, "I always go to bed with my leading ladies, Neil. It is tradition. You shouldn't mind. You are no longer man and wife, but I wanted you to know anyway. Only the great Deneuve was beyond me. My Gilly, she went to bed with her leading men, so what to do but to

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forgive her shameless behavior, *oui?"* The call ended with out-of-control sobbing.

More abrupt was the message later, in which Alain decided, "If the sex queen of the soap operas denies the role in *The Jean Harlow Affair,* I have in mind to offer it to Isabelle Huppert. I have never slept with Isabelle Huppert. You, Neil? You ever sleep with Huppert, Neil?"

I was tempted to pick up the phone, call and tell him—

What?

Alain, this is insane, this whole Harlow business. You're crazy to be here. You have to go back home and—

And what?

Better, maybe, to drop a dime on him with one of my old pals at Parker Center—Steiger, DeSantis—the kind of cop cooperation that would take me off the hook? That made sense, and maybe it would even be doing Alain a favor. I'd always believed in his innocence. What better way to prove friendship than by pushing him to his day in court? Yeah. I'd be doing him a favor, but—

—at what price to my self-respect?

My dignity?

My honor?

To Alain De Guerre's freedom, possibly his life, were a jury to find him guilty of killing Gillian Lance?

Alain trusted me.

He had called originally expecting better of me than to turn him over to the police.

I expected better of myself.

I jumped into a shower to wash away my feelings of guilt, then grabbed a Heineken from the fridge and settled at the computer to reaffirm my faith in Alain's innocence.

My old *L.A. Daily* pass codes still worked, and got me to the florid prose filed by my one-time nemesis, Clancy McPhillip. I swam through the melodrama he always injected into his copy and reconfirmed that the D.A.'s decision to pin Alain to his wife's murder stemmed mainly from evidence that at best was circumstantial, most of it derived from conflicting statements made by a husband besotted with grief, his emotions rarely under control from one minute to the next.

The facts that most often came together:

Alain, finished shooting *Asthma,* is preparing to return to Paris with his American-born wife. He agrees to stay an extra week so she can attend the premiere of her new film, *Strangers,* at Grauman's Chinese. The promotion includes a forecourt ceremony for Gilly and her director, Walker Wheeler. Alain becomes increasingly agitated while Gilly is applying her signature to the wet cement. He begins deriding Wheeler when it's the director's turn, claiming

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Wheeler is a hack and has no business being immortalized at all, much less before Alain De Guerre. Heated words are exchanged. Alain accuses Wheeler of having slept with his wife during filming. The director denies it, strings together a series of X-rated curses, and is so distracted he misspells his signature in the cement. He scratches through it and chucks the stylus at Alain, who responds by whipping out a .22 and aiming it at Wheeler while repeating claims of an affair between the director and Gilly. Alain manages to fire a wild shot before the guards subdue him and drag him off kicking, screaming, and vowing revenge. The bullet flies over stunned fans behind the velvet ropes and plunges into one of the stone lion-dogs guarding the theater entrance. Studio publicists step in diplomatically. The .22 is returned and Alain is released without charges being filed after corner huddles with theater management and the LAPD.

The next morning, an hysterical Alain De Guerre phones 911 and summons the police to the Benedict Canyon cottage he and his wife had rented for the duration. Gilly is on the floor of the master bedroom, dead of a .22-caliber bullet in the head that later will be shown to match the one imbedded in the stone at Grauman's Chinese.

They continued their argument after the forecourt ceremony, he tells detectives. He fled the cottage, spent the night in aimless driving on the freeways, lost his way a few times on his way back, and found her like that. And in other variations on the theme: He drove the freeways after the forecourt ceremony, got back to the cottage the next morning, and saw Wheeler hugging his wife goodbye. He drove off again, the freeways again, lost again, home again; Gilly dead. More variations, each time claiming she threatened to kill herself if he walked out now, Alain angrily tossing the .22 at Gilly and leaving. But, absent the gun anywhere in the cottage, absent a suicide note, the idea of suicide is as suspect as Alain De Guerre.

Wheeler has a verifiable alibi for his whereabouts following the altercation at the theater.

Alain can't account for his time.

Alain has motive, opportunity, and the means to kill his wife.

Alain is indicted.

Alain flees the country.

No amount of memory-rummaging was telling me why I had been convinced of Alain's innocence. What struck me now was how much of his story seemed to mirror facts and rumors surrounding Harlow and Paul Bern. Was that what drew Alain to their story and ultimately took us to the forecourt and Harlow's signed slab? Was that—

What?

What else?

His not mentioning Gillian Lance's signed cement or thinking to visit it before we left Grauman's today . . . Did it say he wasn't the

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grieving husband he had always played at being or that he didn't want brought back ugly memories of events that had led to her death? Or, was it that he didn't want me raising the wrong questions and learning the right truths?

My phone rang and surrendered to the answering machine midway through the first ring, before I could get to it.

Alain screaming: "I don't know why I ever bothered with you. I will accomplish this by myself, what I should have done before this, without you, you—" He descended into French at a clip where one word crashed into the next, none making any more sense than his shout of outrage before clicking off.

I looked at the receiver as if it were a time bomb ready to explode.

A time bomb named Alain De Guerre, who was living out the final chapter of a truth he'd buried inside the fantasy of a motion picture he would never make.

It was half-past midnight.

Research had chewed up the evening.

I dialed Alain's hotel.

The operator connected me to his room.

The phone rang until automatic response kicked in.

"Alain, it's Neil. Pick up, please. Please. Alain, pick up, damn it. . . ."

I threw my act together and headed for the Renaissance, praying I'd get there before the crazy son of a bitch killed himself.

A little reputation goes a long way in this town.

The night clerk remembered my byline from the *Daily* column I used to write.

He had the housekeeping manager check Alain's suite.

Empty.

I tipped a memory-deprived bellman a fiver and he suddenly remembered noticing "that rabbi kind of guy you described."

Alain had left about a half-hour ago.

I took off for Grauman's Chinese.

The last screenings had ended. The theater had emptied and the forecourt seemed naked without the tourist hordes. A parade of overhead lights transformed cement plots that during the day screamed with honored stars' demands for love and remembrance into a somber community of gray and black valleys. Floor spots bathed the militant lion-dogs, guarding them against after-hours trespassers.

I headed toward the Harlow block stage-whispering for Alain.

Got an echo back, then—

—evidence Alain had been there:

A small triangle of cement that appeared to have been chiseled

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out of the lower right corner, near the Blonde Bombshell's heel-prints; nothing I remembered seeing earlier.

A sense he'd discovered what a formidable, impossible task he had set for himself.

I tried Alain's name again, tracking quickly across the forecourt, over the likes of Bob Hope and the Marx Brothers, almost tripping on Gene Kelly's shoes, to the northeast section where Gillian Lance and Walker Wheeler shared side-by-side fame in perpetuity. I got only silence in response, marred by a few night-crawling cars humming along the boulevard.

On her cement block, Gilly had written a few words in French, in an elegant, precise hand as petite as her long-fingered hands and shoe size, a *Thank you, dear America, for this honor* to go with a heart with an erratic arrow drawn through it, aimed toward Wheeler's block; her signature; the film title, *Strangers;* and the date.

On his slab, Wheeler had drawn a heart twice as large, its Cupid's arrow pointed toward Gilly, and printed in irregular block letters that spiraled down like a train heading around a bend, LOVE CONQUERS ALL, followed by his signature and the date.

The hammer and chisel abandoned on top of Wheeler's block had been used to deface it, Wheeler's signature and the inscription barely surviving a dozen or more stab and scrape marks, one word changed to make the inscription read: Death CONQUERS ALL.

I eased onto my hands and knees for a closer look, ran my fingers over the damage as if it were some kind of Braille that would tell me things I should know, and unthinkingly glided my hands into Wheeler's prints. Mine measured larger.

Alain De Guerre said, "You or anybody would also have an easy task of filling his shoes, *mon ami.*" He was posing against the closest stone lion-dog, one leg propped up on its pedestal. I held up a hand, defending myself against the brilliant moon made by the Maglite he was shining at my face. "One need only look at the arrows to see the truth of their relationship. The arrows aim at one another, publicly and defiantly telling the world I am a cuckold." Approaching, he abruptly changed the subject. "My only fellow countryman enshrined here is Maurice Chevalier. Since nineteen hundred and thirty-four. The singer Jeanette MacDonald, his costar in *Love Me Tonight* and *The Merry Widow,* her signature, her hand and footprints, placed in the cement on the same day."

He brought up phlegm and spat on Wheeler's cement.

I managed to get my hand out of the way before the wad landed.

Alain said, "It should be me also here, Neil, next to my precious Gilly, not him. Me. Like Chevalier with MacDonald, the same day, side by side with her. Not only here but for eternity." He glanced toward the stars, wondering, "Do you think they slept together?"

I said, "Let's get out of here and talk about it somewhere

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else, Alain."

"*Oui,* somewhere else. Where I want you to see something."

"You'll tell me back at the hotel."

"*Non,* not there." He adjusted the Maglite so I could see the .22 aimed at me.

"There is somewhere else you need to see."

Alain's precise directions led my Jag to an English-style cottage in Benedict Canyon. It was half-hidden behind a marvel of ageless trees and a chest-high brick wall that could not keep out a determined coyote, about a quarter-mile off the main road. I recognized the address. This was the cottage where Paul Bern was found dead three days after his marriage to Jean Harlow. Years later, it was owned by Jay Sebring, the hairstylist who was among the victims of the Charles Manson Family.

Alain added to the history while inspiring me with the .22 to traverse the wall using the clinging vines and follow the Mag-lit brick path to the front door, saying, "In here is where my darling Gilly and I reposed while I was directing *Asthma.* A place they now tell is haunted, for me only by memories and by Wheeler, who gave me the arm by acquiring it and moving in after he had defiled Gilly and I was back to Paris, like the sick dog he always was."

"Alain, you told me Gilly had many men."

"But none other at the Grauman's Chinese, *mon ami.*"

The cottage was all darkness, the door secured by a series of locks. The windows lacked any protection. One on the down-canyon side had missing shutters and glass and stood out like a point of entry that had been used more than once. I climbed inside first.

"That way and turn to the left," Alain said, the Maglite lighting the route. "To the master bedroom, to see where Harlow and Bern were and where Alain and Gilly were and—" He stopped and took a heavy breath. "Just go," he said.

Alain flipped a light switch to crack the darkness in the bedroom. "Oh, dear Lord, there at the bathroom," he said, reciting the words like a bad actor finding punctuation where none exists. Pointing with the .22.

Walker Wheeler lay naked, dead, belly-down in front of the full-length bathroom mirror, his head resting on a pillow of blood caused by the bullet hole from the .38 firmly gripped in his left hand. The area reeked of a sweet scent I could not put a name to, at odds with the smell of a body in the early stages of decay.

As if reading my mind, Alain said, "Mitsouko, Harlow's favorite *parfum.* Homage to Paul Bern. I think, appropriate to the moment."

"Jesus, Alain. You murdered Walker Wheeler."

Alain shrugged. "He murdered Gilly. An eye for an eye. In the end, death conquers all. Look over on the bed to see what I see."

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A handwritten note rested on the throw pillows:

Unfortunately this is the only way to make good the frightful wrong I have done Alain De Guerre and to wipe out my abject humiliation.
Walker W. Wheeler

Alain said, "A suicide note, *non?* He committed suicide, as anyone with two eyes and a brain can see."

"A suicide note written how, at the point of your gun? When Gilly was killed, Wheeler had an alibi for the time."

"And me, also an alibi, Neil. I loved her. That has always been my alibi."

"For tonight? You have an alibi for tonight? For the dead man on the floor?"

"For why? You read his suicide note. I have hands that are clean hands. As clean as Jean Harlow's hands were clean. I am here now, not then, not when he put the gun to his head. Soon, I will be gone, and only you the wiser."

"Only until I tell the police what I know."

"*Oui.* Yes. You must tell the police. You should do that after I leave you."

I said, "Before you go, explain something to me, Alain. Why this elaborate scheme? Why involve me in the first place?"

His laugh carried to the ceiling. "Why else? The drama, *mon ami,* in what is my last great production, the one I will be most remembered for directing down through the ages. *The Alain and Gillian Affair,* written by someone I know and trust to tell the story after I'm gone in a way that clouds it in eternal mystery. Questions giving birth to new questions and answers never in agreement. Do that for me, Neil, and it won't be bad for you either, *oui?* I promise."

"You are crazy, aren't you?"

"Like a fox," Alain De Guerre said, and turned the .22 on himself.

When I got back home, there was a message from Alain waiting on my answering machine.

The next night, in an hour between midnight and dawn, when the forecourt at Grauman's Chinese was as still as a graveyard, I traveled across Jean Harlow, up Irene Dunne and the Ritz Brothers, to the stone lion-dog hovering nearby.

I located the out-of-the-way cavity in the lower rear Alain had described and dug in my arm almost to my shoulder, patting around until I found the strongbox he said would be there. It was caked with dust and rust and, once home, I had to jimmy the lock open. Inside the strongbox were a .38 pistol and the note Alain had alluded to, a detailed description of Paul Bern's murder, handwritten and signed, but not by Paul Bern. Or by Jean Harlow. ●

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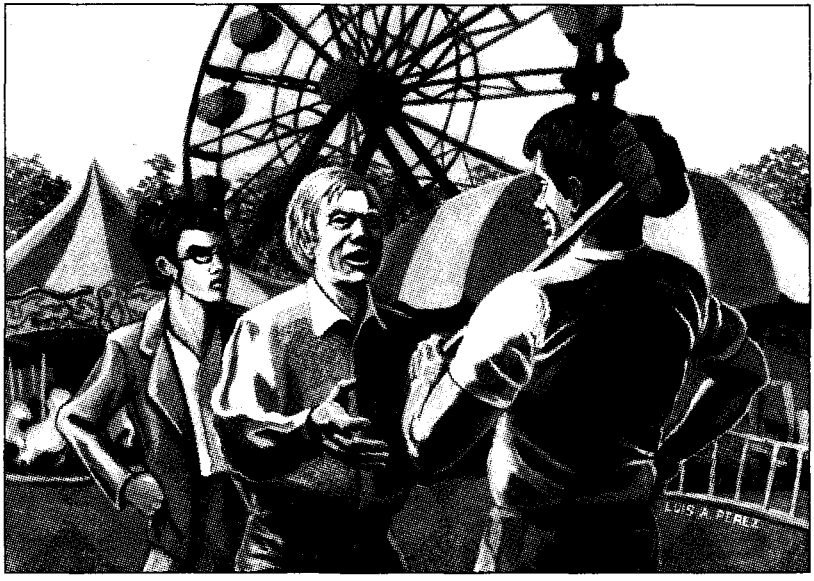

Art by Luis Perez

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THE WRIGHTSVILLE CARNIVAL

by Edward D. Hoch

It had been many years since Ellery Queen last visited Wrightsville, and his first impression was one of change. He'd come by train the first time, and later had flown up to the tiny Wrightsville Airport north of town. This time he'd driven, because it was a glorious summer's day and the highways north from New York made it a pleasant journey.

He entered the town from the southeast, driving in on Lincoln Street to the High Village Square. It was really a circle, not a square, with the old Jezreel Monument still standing at its center. Ellery noticed at once that the familiar Bon Ton Department Store was still on the corner, but now occupied the entire block between Lincoln and Washington Streets. He'd booked a room at the Hollis Hotel, overlooking the Square, and ate a late lunch at their Coffee Shoppe just as he had done on the first of his many visits. That

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was where Police Chief Anselm Newby recognized him.

"It's Mr. Queen, isn't it?" Chief Newby asked. He'd been a young, tough, honest cop when he took over after Chief Dakin's retirement, and had once called Ellery a "New York wiseacre." He still looked tough and perhaps even more muscular, but now his face was lined and his hair had streaks of gray.

"That's right, Chief," Ellery said, rising from his table to shake hands. "It's been a long time. Good to see you again."

"You're not up here on another of your crime-solving junkets, are you?"

EQ parodies and pastiches are our theme this month. *EQMM* reviewer Jon L. Breen summarizes how parodists and pastiche writers have treated EQ in his article on p. 6; and we have new examples of both forms. Mr. Hoch would probably have been Queen's own choice to continue his work (he was once hired by EQ to write a novel with the Queen byline but not the EQ character). And Jon Breen and Josh Pachter, whose EQ parody appears on p. 142, had parodies published by EQ in *EQMM*. ¶

"No, I just wanted a few days' rest. Thought I'd see how the town was getting along. Is that a Ferris wheel I see behind the Town Hall?"

The chief nodded. "We have carnival week every August. The kids love it. Keeps me busy, though, looking out for unsavory elements."

"Any trouble with drugs?"

"No more so than other towns. Nothing bad since that trouble at the Bijou."*

Ellery tried to remember what year that had been. Originally a movie house, the Bijou had been closed for a time when a drive-in theater outside of town took away its business, but it eventually reopened with live theater. "Is it still a playhouse?"

"We have a good season of summer theater there. The drive-in closed when the kids didn't need it for smooching anymore, but there's a new multiplex out on Route 16 that just opened last year."

"Maybe I'll walk down to the theater later and have a look. Anyone else around from the old days?"

"The ones you knew are mostly dead and gone, Mr. Queen. Got a new lady editor at the *Wrightsville Record*. She's pretty good." He started to move on, then asked, "You staying long?"

"Just a few days to unwind. I'm here at the Hollis if you need me."

"I don't expect to," he said a bit sourly, and was gone.

*See "The Death of Don Juan," by Ellery Queen (*Argosy* 5/62, collected in *Queens Full*).

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The Bijou Theater was across the Square and a block east on Lower Main Street. The marquee informed Ellery that it was in the midst of a two-week run of the old Shaw play *Major Barbara,* to be followed by a production of the musical *Gypsy.* His gaze drifted across the street and he was startled to see that the old Kut-Rate Drug Company had been replaced by a modern CVS drugstore with a large parking lot. And Al Brown's Ice Cream Parlor had become a Starbucks coffee shop. Perhaps he'd come too late to recapture the charm of the town he remembered. He walked back along the street, past the newspaper office.

"Pardon me," a woman's voice said, "would you be Mr. Ellery Queen, the author?"

"I plead guilty," he answered with a smile, turning to face a red-haired woman who was probably in her early thirties. "And who might you be?"

"Polly Watkins. I'm the editor of the *Wrightsville Record.* Chief Newby tipped me off that you were in town." She had the intelligent, studious look of an editor, with small black-rimmed glasses that went well with her face. He was almost surprised that she wasn't holding a pad and pencil in her hands.

"The word gets around quickly, doesn't it? The first time I came here to live, the *Record* had it all over page one. But what happened to Frank Lloyd?"

She smiled a bit sadly. "Frank passed away a few years back. He was my uncle and he knew I'd studied journalism in college. I even worked here for him one summer." She took a breath, controlling her emotions. "He left me the paper when he died. I'm the publisher and editor."

"That was very generous of him. I'm sure you're doing a good job."

Her smile widened with a touch of pride. "Well, I'm selling more advertising and trying to appeal to younger readers. Local-color stories are always good, but nothing much happens in Wrightsville. I was on my way over to cover the carnival when Chief Newby told me you were in town."

"I'm not here in an official capacity," Ellery assured her. "I just wanted a few days off and thought a drive up here would be relaxing."

"May I interview you?"

"I'd rather you didn't," he murmured. "I have nothing new to say."

"Are you working on a book?"

"No."

Polly Watkins was not about to give up that easily. "Well, if I can't interview you, at least come over to the carnival with me. I'll show you around."

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"All right." She was an attractive young woman and it was a good way to reacquaint himself with the town. They crossed Lower Main Street and walked around the edge of the Square toward Memorial Park, where the Ferris wheel towered over the Town Hall. "I see the post office and the library still look about the same," he commented as they passed the buildings.

"Oh, some things never change. The library loans videos and DVDs now, of course, in addition to books. That's probably different from your time." She interrupted their conversation to answer her cell phone.

"Cell phones are different, too," he remarked as she finished the call and replaced it in her purse. "Though we see lots of them in New York."

"You don't have one?" she asked. "I'd think writers would need them."

"Not if they want to get any work done." They walked past the American Legion bandstand into the carnival midway, assaulted by barkers hawking ring-toss games or wanting to guess your weight. Folks were lined up for a ride on the Ferris wheel, while most kids preferred the bumper cars. There was even a small merry-go-round for the more faint-hearted.

"The Legion sponsors it each summer and the folks all like it. I usually interview a few of the kids and take some pictures." She'd produced a digital camera from her purse and was aiming it at a crowd scene when someone caught her eye. "I can't believe he's back in town," she said, half to herself.

"Someone you know?"

"All too well. This could be trouble." She headed through the crowd toward a dark-haired man in jeans and a T-shirt, carrying a hammer. A tattooed eagle was visible on his left biceps. Ellery followed behind, though in her sudden anxiety she seemed to have forgotten his presence.

The man must have sensed her approach, because he turned and greeted her. "Hello, honey child. How you been?"

"Sam Nation, what are you doing in Wrightsville?"

"I used to live here, remember? Before your rag of a newspaper drove me outta town. Now I'm a roustabout with the carnival and there's no law says I can't travel where I want."

"Does Janice know you're here?"

He stood there grinning at her. "Why should she? That's in the past, just like you."

She stood her ground, just inches away from his smirk. "You've done enough harm here, Sam. If you try to see Janice I'll plaster your face all over the *Record*'s front page!"

"Just like last time?" He hefted the hammer in his hand, and

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there was something about the gesture that prompted Ellery's defensive reflexes. He squeezed quickly between them.

"I don't believe we've met," he said, offering a handshake. "My name is Queen."

"Is it now?" Sam Nation asked with another smirk, but he retreated a step and shifted the hammer to his left hand. "You a friend of Polly's?"

"I am today. She's interviewing me for a story."

Nation gave him a wink. "Be careful of her. She likes older men." Then he walked away without looking back.

"What did all that mean?" Ellery asked her.

"It's a long boring story. You know, small-town life. You've been to Wrightsville enough to know how it is."

"Even long boring stories can be interesting to an author. Who is this Janice? A friend of yours?"

Polly sucked in her breath before answering. "Yes, and here comes her sister. I hope to God she doesn't see Nation."

The woman had already spotted Polly Watkins and headed toward them, accompanied by a slender man wearing a short-sleeved golf shirt. She was older than the editor, perhaps around forty, and gave the impression she could still be a handsome woman if she took the time. "Marge, I—"

"Did you see him, Polly? Sam Nation, standing there as brazen as all get-out!"

"We exchanged a few words," Polly admitted. "Janice isn't here, is she?"

"She said something about coming over tonight." She turned her attention to Ellery. "Who's this?"

"Ellery Queen, the author. He lived here for a time, years ago. Ellery, this is Marge Henneset and her husband Wayne."

Wayne greeted him with a vigorous handshake. "Going to be here long, Mr. Queen? We have a nice golf course at the Wrightsville Country Club, out beyond Twin Hill Cemetery."

"I'm afraid I won't have time for it this trip." The women were still discussing the sudden reappearance of Sam Nation in their midst, and Ellery was far more interested in that.

"I could get you in as my guest if you're interested,"

"Perhaps another time," he answered with deliberate vagueness. Golf had never been his game.

"I'm going over to see Janice," Polly told the other woman. "We can't let her come here and stumble upon him without warning like I did."

"I don't think that's necessary," Marge Henneset said. "There's someone else she's been seeing. I'm sure he'll keep an eye out for anyone bothering her."

"I still want to warn her."

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"Polly," the older woman laid a hand on her wrist. "Stay out of it. Stick to your newspaper."

They parted and Ellery followed the editor along the midway, wondering if she still remembered his presence. Certainly the encounter with Sam Nation, and then with Marge Henneset and her husband, had unnerved her. As they reached the Legion bandstand again, he caught up with her and asked, "Are you all right?"

"Oh, Mr. Queen! Forgive me. I have to go see this woman."

"Suppose we sit down on that bench and you tell me all about it."

She shook her head. "This doesn't concern you. I'm sorry I acted so unprofessionally."

He took her arm, guiding her gently to the bench. She didn't resist, and once they were seated he said again, "Tell me about it."

She managed a wan smile. "Hey, I'm supposed to be interviewing you."

"I can guess some of it. You and this Janice were both involved with Sam Nation, weren't you?"

"That's a nice way of putting it. He was the town's bad boy. You could find him most any night at the pool hall on Upper Whistling Avenue. But I was attracted to him and I went out with him a few times. Then Janice Collins took over. I tried to warn her about what he was like—I even published the police reports of his arrests on minor charges in my newspaper—but she was getting divorced and looking for a fling." She sighed. "You don't want to hear the rest of it. I've talked too much already."

"I'm a writer, Polly," he reminded her. "Nothing you could say would shock me."

"Everything's grist for the mill? I don't want to turn up in your next book."

"I assure you that'll never happen. But I would like to meet this Janice Collins."

"What for?"

"It may be my imagination working overtime, but when you mentioned Janice to Sam Nation his grip on that hammer tightened, as if he was getting ready to swing it. That's when I stepped between you two. Would he have any reason to be angry with her?"

"There was a baby," Polly answered reluctantly. "Sam was gone by then and Janice put it up for adoption. Somehow he found out about it and threatened her over the telephone. But that was more than a year ago. I imagine he's cooled down by now."

"What did he want her to do? Raise it without a father?"

"It was a boy, and he demanded to know where his son was. Of course she didn't know, and that just infuriated him more."

"I really think I should see her. She could be in danger while the carnival's in town."

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It was a struggle, but he finally convinced Polly that it would be best if he came with her to warn Janice Collins that she could be in danger. She called Janice on her cell phone and told her they were coming. Back at the newspaper office they took her car and headed out North Hill Drive. It was one of the town's better areas and Polly explained that her friend had acquired the house as part of the divorce settlement. "Who was she married to?" Ellery asked.

"Wagner Collins, vice-president of the Wrightsville National Bank. You probably never knew him. They were married for six years and gave some memorable parties. Here we are now." She swung her little red Saturn into the driveway of a modest white colonial, quite proper for a banker's house in Wrightsville.

"Was she still married when Sam Nation came along?"

"Married but separated. Her pregnancy was the last straw for Wagner. He knew it wasn't his."

Janice Collins met them at the door. "It's a pleasure, Mr. Queen. I've read all your books." She was short and dark-haired, with a topknot that added a couple of inches to her height. Her pastel lounging costume was not designed for gardening or housework.

"That's a lot of reading," he said with a smile.

She led them into a formal living room where everything was in its place and the mantel clock told the time to the precise second. "Now what's this about Sam Nation?" she asked her friend.

"We saw him at the carnival in Memorial Park. He's working there all week as a roustabout."

Janice Collins snorted. "That's a good job for him."

"Has he tried to contact you?" Polly asked.

"Not yet, and I doubt if he will. I have no idea where his son is. But this must be boring for you, Mr. Queen. Can I get you a drink?"

"No, thank you. We can't stay long. I just wanted to warn you that this fellow Nation looked like a bad customer to me. I'd advise you to call the police if he comes here."

"We're not imagining it," Polly told her. "Your sister saw him, too. He was carrying a hammer and looked as if he'd like to use it."

"I won't call the police," she told them. "I'll call my ex-husband. He'll know how to deal with Sam."

"Do you still see him?" Polly wondered.

"Occasionally. Wagner's a good man. I just couldn't live with him any longer."

Ellery wanted to stress his warning, but he said no more. He barely knew these people and perhaps he was basing too much on the way Sam Nation had gripped his hammer. "Are you still going to the carnival tonight?" Polly asked.

"I'll have to think about it," Janice answered.

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Polly drove Ellery back to the Square and left him at his hotel. "I hope you enjoy your stay in Wrightsville," she told him. "And I still want that interview before you leave."

After dinner at the Hollis Hotel, Ellery strolled around the Square for a bit, knowing he'd end up at the carnival. Beneath the bright lights and a clear evening sky it seemed even more crowded than that afternoon. Family groups with small children mingled with older teenagers on their own. There were girlish screams from the direction of the bumper cars and laughter from the high-school boys. A long line had formed at the Ferris wheel. Ellery took it all in and wondered how this perfect American setting could ever have been the locale for murder.

He was about to head back to the Hollis when he spotted Sam Nation talking to a man he didn't recognize. They seemed to be arguing, and Ellery strolled closer to hear what was being said. The other man, wearing dark slacks and an open-necked white shirt, was older than Nation and not quite as tall. But he was making his point with a jabbing finger that was almost in Nation's face. "Just stay away from her, that's all you have to do!"

Sam Nation was not intimidated. "She had my kid. I just want to know where he is."

"You don't deserve to know. And Janice doesn't know where he is anyway. He's been adopted by a family who cares about him more than you do."

"What business is it of yours, Collins?" Nation asked, launching a counterattack. "You're not married to her anymore."

"She asked me to speak to you. Just stay away and don't make trouble for yourself."

"I'll bet she's still a hot little number, isn't she?"

Collins grabbed a fistful of his T-shirt and yanked. Ellery moved to prevent a fight for the second time that day, but suddenly Nation saw and recognized him. "See this guy? He was here with that newspaper gal this afternoon. He's probably Janice's latest conquest."

Wagner Collins turned to stare at Ellery and Nation broke free of his grasp. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Just a visitor, name of Ellery Queen. I happened to be with Polly Watkins this afternoon."

"Do you know my ex-wife?"

"Polly and I drove out for a brief visit. It's the first time I met her."

Sam Nation wanted no more of Janice's former husband. He backed away from them and quickly disappeared into the crowd. Collins merely shook his head. "Sometimes I think Janice needs a keeper. I did the best I could while we were married, but she had a habit of disappearing after parties. I'd be home cleaning up and she'd walk in at four in the morning."

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"Yet you care enough about her to throw a scare into Nation."

"That punk! Her men friends have generally been a bit classier than him!"

"If he's looking for his son, that could make him dangerous."

"That sort is all talk," Collins replied and walked away, leaving Ellery standing alone.

He strolled around, keeping an eye out for Sam Nation, but saw no sign of him. He even tried his luck at a couple of the carnival games, and came away with a small stuffed bear as a prize.

Ellery had planned to spend the following morning at the library, looking through the local newspaper file for familiar names. So many of those he remembered were gone, taken by death or the lure of the big city. He looked through a few years of the *Wrightsville Record* and finally decided to try the newspaper office, where they might maintain a morgue with an index of stories and obits. By that time it was the lunch hour and Polly Watkins had gone off somewhere. He decided to come back later when she was in, and walked around the Square to the carnival once more. Perhaps he was hoping to spot Sam Nation, but there was no sign of the man. He settled instead for a ride on the Ferris wheel, where the line was shorter than the previous night. From the top he could see virtually all of Wrightsville, even out to the old Van Horn estate* on North Hill Drive.

As he was leaving the park at about a quarter to two, a white convertible pulled up to the curb. He recognized Wayne Henneset behind the wheel, with his bag of golf clubs in the backseat. "Ellery, just the man I'm looking for!"

He put up his hand in protest. "No golf for me today."

"No, no. I've already played. I want you to come home with me and talk to Marge. She's worried about her sister and that carnival fellow."

"I don't know that I could help with that."

"Just talk to her. It'll set her mind at ease."

"All right," he agreed, slipping into the passenger seat next to Henneset. "How'd your game go today?"

"Broke eighty. First time all summer."

It was only a five-minute ride to the house, out on Washington Street near the station, and they found Marge in the kitchen, frosting a cake. "It's not for you," she told her husband. "They're having an auction of baked goods at the carnival tonight."

"Guess I'll have to bid on it," he told her with a grin.

"It's a pleasure seeing you again, Ellery," she said. "What brings you here today?"

"Wayne said you were concerned about your sister. I can tell you

*See *Ten Days' Wonder* by Ellery Queen (1948).

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her ex-husband was at the carnival last night and told Nation to stay away from her."

"Really? I'm surprised he—"

"Our cell phone's vibrating," Henneset said, reaching into his pocket. He flipped it open, pressed a button, said hello, and listened. "Hold on," he said into the phone. "It's your sister," he told Marge. "She sounds upset."

He held it close to her ear and Ellery could also hear the woman's voice on the other end. *"What is this? What are you doing with that?"* Behind her voice was the sound of her mantel clock striking two. Then she screamed and they heard a thump.

"Janice!" her sister yelled into the phone. "Are you all right?" But the line went dead.

"My God!" Henneset said. "We've got to get over there."

"What we've got to do is call Chief Newby," Ellery decided instantly. "Dial nine-one-one."

Henneset was fast with the phone, dialing Emergency and giving Janice Collins's street address. Then they hurried out to his car. Marge sat in front with her husband while Ellery slipped into the backseat with the golf clubs, admiring the spotless irons and the sock-covered woods. Wayne Henneset drove fast, but as they pulled into Janice's block they saw that the chief's car was already in the driveway. Anselm Newby was at the door with a deputy, trying to get in.

"No one answers the door," he told them.

"I've got a key," Marge Henneset said, edging him aside as she fitted it into the lock.

They found her sister's body on the living room floor, bleeding from a terrible blow to her left temple. There was no doubt that Janice Collins had been murdered.

While Marge sobbed uncontrollably, Wayne Henneset filled in Chief Newby on Sam Nation's presence at the carnival. Newby nodded and called in the information to his office, telling them to send the coroner and the undertaker. His deputy was already taking photos of the crime scene.

"No weapon," Newby noted after looking around.

"Nation had a hammer last night at the carnival," Ellery said.

"We'll pull him in for questioning. That's all we can do. Maybe one of the neighbors saw a car or something. And we'll check for prints, of course."

Ellery sat with Marge Henneset in the kitchen, trying to comfort her, while her husband badgered the police chief. Two more officers arrived on the scene to help question neighbors, but no one had noticed any visitor at the Collins house. Ellery wandered out the back door of the house, surveying the yard and its access to the next

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street. He felt sure that was how the killer had entered unseen.

Back inside, Marge recovered enough to tell her husband, "Someone has to call Wagner Collins. Can you do that?"

"Sure," he said. They were dusting the phone for prints, so he used his cell phone to break the news to the ex-husband. As he hung up, the mantel clock was chiming and Ellery was surprised to glance at his watch and see that it was almost three already.

"You'd better get down to the carnival," Henneset advised the chief. "Wagner Collins is convinced Nation killed her and he sounds like he's out for blood."

"I'll ride along with you," Ellery decided.

"I believe my officers can handle the situation, Mr. Queen," the chief responded. His opinion of Ellery hadn't improved with the passing years.

"I'll drive you," Henneset said. "Come on, Marge. There's nothing more we can do here."

"She was my sister, Wayne! I want to—"

"It's in the hands of the police now. They'll find whoever did it."

"Do you think it was Sam Nation?"

"We'll see what he has to say. Come on, Ellery. Climb in back."

Once more there'd been a murder in Wrightsville. It had happened before when he came to this town, a gentle place that seemed so far removed from violence. He remembered the first time, the death of Rosemary Haight, and Nora Wright's funeral at the Twin Hill cemetery.* He wondered if he'd be there again for the funeral of Janice Collins.

It was only a few minutes' drive to the center of town, and Ellery spotted Polly Watkins hurrying from the *Record* office to head across the Square to the carnival. "Let me off here!" he told Henneset. "Polly looks as if she's after a story."

He left the car and caught up with her in front of the post office. She was startled by his sudden appearance. "Ellery! Where'd you come from?"

"I was with the Hennesets. Where are you headed?"

"I heard a police call about a killing at the Collins address. Then I saw the chief's car just arrive at the carnival. What happened?"

"Someone killed Janice Collins. Her ex-husband thinks it was Sam Nation. Apparently he's not content to leave it in Chief Newby's hands."

They hurried along the carnival midway, searching for Nation or Collins or Chief Newby, but seeing none of them at first. A few children ran past, holding cotton candy and heading for the rides. "There!" Polly said, pointing suddenly. They had a glimpse of Wagner Collins, disappearing around the back of the merry-go-round, heading for the area where the carnival crew's trailers were parked.

*See *Calamity Town* by Ellery Queen (1942).

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Ellery couldn't run as fast as in his younger days, but he still covered the ground quickly, keeping up with Polly Watkins. They were in time to see Collins, holding something in his hand, yank open the door of one trailer. "He's got a gun!" Polly told him. He couldn't be sure, but he feared she was right.

"Wagner!" he shouted. "Stop!"

The man ignored him, leaving the first trailer and moving on to the second one. Ellery could see the gun clearly now. As they ran toward him, Wagner Collins turned and warned them back. "Stay away! I'll handle this!"

Then they saw Sam Nation. He had emerged shirtless from one of the other trailers, perhaps attracted by the voices. Collins turned toward him and raised the pistol. Ellery threw himself forward, colliding with the banker just as the gun went off. They both toppled to the ground. The gunshot had brought people running from all directions. A bit dazed by his fall, Ellery looked up to see Chief Newby, with Marge and Wayne Henneset close behind him. The gun had come free from Wagner Collins's hand, and Newby kicked it out of reach before the banker could retrieve it.

"What do you think you're doing?" the chief asked Collins. "This is a police matter, not something for private justice."

"She was my wife," he said, getting up slowly from the ground.

"I didn't do it!" Nation insisted, speaking for the first time. "I didn't even know she was dead until I just heard it on the radio."

Chief Newby took out a pair of handcuffs. "I think I'd better take you in for questioning. It'll be safer for all concerned."

"You don't need those. I'll come with you."

"Perhaps we should all come with you," Ellery suggested. "It might help straighten things out."

Back at the new police station across from the county courthouse, they crowded into Chief Newby's office. Sam Nation had gotten a shirt from somewhere to cover his bare chest. He was seated next to Newby, and the others were careful to avoid being too close to him. Ellery sat next to Wagner Collins on a wooden bench. The banker's weapon, shy of its bullets, now rested on the chief's desk. Marge and Wayne were together on a second bench, and Polly Watkins had wheeled a stenographer's chair in from the outer office.

"Mr. Queen believes he has some information on this case," Chief Newby began. "He's quite the New York detective, as you know."

Ellery cleared his throat. "Before I begin, I'd like to make one telephone call. May I use the phone in the outer office?"

"Go ahead," Newby told him.

Ellery returned after a few moments and resumed his seat. "I just had to confirm one detail," he told them. "Now I'm ready to tell you who killed Janice Collins."

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"We know who killed her," Wagner growled, ready to spring across the chief's desk at Sam Nation's throat.

"Don't be too sure. Remember there were three of us here who actually heard the killing take place over the telephone—her sister Marge, Marge's husband Wayne, and myself."

"I'll never forget hearing it," Marge said softly.

"Neither will I," Ellery agreed, "speaking to her killer as he swung the weapon at her head, while her mantel clock chimed twice in the background. I'd noticed yesterday that the chime came exactly on the hour."

"Get to the point if you have one," Chief Newby urged.

"Well, my point is that when we were out there this afternoon, after the killing, the clock chimed a couple of minutes before the hour. It couldn't have gained that much time overnight. Mantel clocks are usually battery-operated or wind-up to avoid the necessity for a cord. Even if there was a cord and a brief power failure, or a low battery, the clock might have been two minutes slow, but it couldn't be fast unless someone had changed the hands. I asked myself why someone would do that, and I could think of only one possible explanation—so the clock would chime twice while Janice was on the phone to her sister.

"But at first that made no sense at all. It chimed twice because it was exactly two o'clock when she called the cell phone in Wayne's pocket. Why would the clock need to be changed when that was the correct time? But what if, I asked myself, it wasn't the correct time? What if the killer changed the time so it would seem to be two o'clock when Janice was killed?"

Chief Newby threw up his hands in exasperation. "What are you trying to say, Queen? All three of you heard the clock chime two during that phone call, and you said the time was in fact two o'clock."

"Then what possible advantage could that be to the killer? I can think of only one—to establish an alibi for the exact moment of the killing. What we heard on that cell phone wasn't a phone call at all; it was a recording. Of the three of us who heard it, I could eliminate myself. That left only two—Marge and Wayne Henneset here—who could be trying to establish an alibi."

Wayne was on his feet. "What are you trying to say, that my wife would kill her own sister?"

"No," Ellery replied, "because if the phone call was really a recording, the killer had to be in a position to answer it at exactly the right time—a few seconds before the clock chimed the hour. The phone was in your pocket, Henneset, and we didn't hear it ring. You said it vibrated, removed it from your pocket, and pressed a button, not to answer it but to play a recording, holding it so we'd both hear it."

"That's insane! What possible motive would I have for killing Janice?"

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"When I was sitting in the backseat with your golf clubs, I noticed how clean the irons were, with none of the dirt or grass stains one usually sees. Most golfers clean their clubs at home, if they clean them at all. I wondered where you might have been if you weren't playing golf. At Janice's house? Perhaps you'd been there more than once when Marge thought you were on the golf course."

The color had drained from Marge Henneset's face. "Wayne," she whispered. "You and Janice—?"

"You had just come from killing her when you saw me on the street and picked me up. It was a lucky break for you because I would be present to strengthen your alibi. Perhaps you wanted to break off the affair and Janice was threatening to confess everything to her sister. The arrival of her former lover with the carnival provided you with a perfect suspect. You might even have checked his movements and learned he was alone in his trailer at that time, without an alibi. You killed Janice shortly before two o'clock, close enough so the coroner wouldn't notice any discrepancy in the time of death. You'd previously advanced her mantel clock to a minute before two and used the recorder built into your cell phone—the 'voice memo' feature most cell phones have these days—to capture her dying words as the clock chimed. That's when she asked what you were doing and you delivered the fatal blow to her head. If she'd spoken your name, the plan wouldn't have worked, but she didn't. You turned her clock back to the proper time. Only in your haste you made it a few minutes fast. Just before two o'clock you told us your phone was vibrating, removed it from your pocket, and punched the last of the menu options needed to get the 'voice memo' to play back. That's how we heard Janice's dying words."

"How do you intend to prove any of this?" Henneset challenged, ignoring his ashen-faced wife.

"You needed a weapon to kill her and I doubt if you entered her house with a hammer in your hand. It would have been something that looked more natural under the circumstances. Something like one of those golf drivers that could be returned to your bag and covered with a sock."

That was when Wayne Henneset lost control and leaped for Ellery's throat.

Polly Watkins got her story and Ellery suffered only minor bruising before Chief Newby had the handcuffs on Henneset. It was only later that she remembered to ask him, "Who was it you had to call before you solved it for us?"

Ellery merely smiled. "Even the best deductions need to be confirmed sometimes. I phoned the country club and asked if Wayne had played golf there today. He hadn't." ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

AND MAYBE MORE

by Michael Z. Lewin

Gina was alone in the office when she heard footsteps on the stairs. Normally the sound would have pleased her. Not many clients came off the street to the Lunghi Detective Agency, but those who did usually provided more interesting cases than the bread-and-butter work from the legal profession. Beggars and private detectives may not be choosers, but a little jam now and then is good for everyone.

Today, however, Gina's heart sank rather than lifted as the unexpected visitor climbed to the office door. *So* close to five o'clock . . . Gina's plan had been to close the office ten minutes early. The *plan* was to catch her son, David, before he went to his Monday afterschool class in Web-site design. David had things to tell, Gina was sure. And the best time to extract the information was when he badly wanted to be elsewhere. He would be thinking, "I've got to get out of here. How can I get out of here?"

How? By telling his mother what she wanted to know, of course.

What Gina wanted to know was *everything* David knew about his sister Marie's latest source of money. Marie refused to say anything more than that it was legal and that it wasn't dangerous.

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Pushed, she would throw a teen tantrum and stomp to her room. It had already happened twice.

There were, of course, steps that Gina and Angelo could take as her parents. But Gina much preferred to get information without invoking the iron fist. One of the sources of information about Marie was David.

The children went to the same school. And David often trailed around with his sister and her gang of girlfriends. Marie complained about it at family dinners, although it seemed to Gina that she was also rather proud of her little brother and his accomplishments, however geeky. After a lifetime of sniping at each other, this new mutual admiration between the two children was a pleasure—and relief.

Michael Z. Lewin's "Lunghi Family" private-eye series began in *EQMM* before the author had even considered writing books about them. But he did subsequently publish two books in the series. (See *Family Business* and *Family Planning.)* Another Lewin series you'll enjoy is that starring Albert Samson. *Booklist* says of the latest entry, *Eye Opener* (Five Star 12/04), "savor this one. It's an emotional roller coaster . . . but it's not to be missed." ✝

But a corollary of their new mateyness was that it was now harder than it used to be to get David to rat out his sister. Marie continued to sail close to the wind—constantly taking risks—and this was certainly not David's style. But the fact was that many of Marie's friends had younger sisters, *girls,* not far from David's age. David was now so hungry for a real girlfriend that he almost drooled. He certainly viewed staying in Marie's good books in an entirely new light.

To break David down about Marie, Gina would need to make him feel that he was at risk of losing his other current passion—the Web-site design class. He would have spent all weekend looking forward to it.

Between the energy David put into fantasies about girls and the time he spent in front of a computer, it was amazing that he was still doing so well at school. Certainly Marie wasn't. How well she did or didn't do at school was getting serious.

Who'd be a kid again, eh?

Certainly the man who knocked lightly on the door at the top of the stairs and then entered the office was no kid. He was forty if he was a day: bald, short, and dumpy.

Once inside the office he stopped. He held on to the door handle as if to make sure no one was going to prevent his escape if he decided to run for it.

A nervous Nellie. Gina sighed inwardly. Bound to take time. Could cornering David wait till the slot before Wednesday's class?

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Perhaps Angelo would be finished with his surveillance job by then, and able to cover for her in the office. Ah, well.

With a smile Gina stepped out from behind her desk and said, "Hello. I'm Gina Lunghi. Would you care for a cup of tea? I'm just making one."

Angelo and Marie spotted each other on Walcot Street as they headed for home from opposite directions. Marie was coming from the town center and called, "Hi, Daddy." She waited at the door to the flat as he approached.

Angelo would have called back, but he was very tired. So he just waved. However, he wasn't too tired to recognize that his moody daughter must be "up." She could just as easily have gone into the flat and slammed the door behind her. But Angelo's fatigue *was* too great for him to remember what new problem with Marie he was supposed to have been thinking about during the dreary hours he'd spent sitting in a car outside 43 Camden Green Close. And nothing is drearier and more tiring than a whole day spent watching for something that doesn't happen, unless it's an eighth consecutive day watching for something that doesn't happen.

Ah, well, it was what the client wanted.

What was it about Marie? Something at school? No. Something else. But it just wouldn't come back.

Then, just before Angelo got to his elder child, the door to the office opened. The doors to home and office stood side by side, facing the street, the original buildings having been united only internally. And from the office a man emerged.

The man was short and a bit chunky. He stood for a moment staring directly ahead, oblivious to the teenage girl standing beside him within arm's reach. The man then took a deep breath, perhaps to mark the end of a stressful episode, and he walked straight ahead, crossing the street. Both Angelo and Marie looked after him until he disappeared up the tunnel of steps that led to the Paragon.

"What was *that?*" Marie asked her father. She moved toward the street, aping the man's odd gait. At the curb she turned back, expecting her father to be amused.

Well, she'd certainly caught the man's funny walk. Was *that* what they taught them to do in the drama classes she liked so much?

"Go on and laugh, Daddy," Marie said. "You know you want to."

"Good day at school?"

"School finished *hours* ago. Duh." Marie pushed into the entryway that led up to the flat. But she didn't slam the door.

Definitely one of her better moods. And what the hey, Angelo thought. Maybe Marie would grow up into a sensitive, caring adult one day. It could happen, right?

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Dinner, as was often the case on Mondays, comprised a diverse collection of leftovers. There was Italian fare from Sunday dinner, of course, as well as kai phad phed from Saturday's takeaway from Sukothai. There was also a little of the curry Rosetta, Angelo's sister and the children's aunt, made for the family the previous Thursday. But Marie was not satisfied with any of it.

"What's the *point* of living so close to Schwartz's and never using it? You *know,* don't you, that *Venue* has rated them the best burgers in Bath for *six,* s-i-x straight years." She held up six fingers and flashed them at her parents and at Rosetta.

"If you're not happy with what we feed you, young lady," Angelo said, "then buy your own damn food."

"Okay," Marie said lightly. She was out of her chair and out of the kitchen door before Angelo could work out that he had fallen into a trap.

"Great," Gina said with a sigh.

What Marie was doing for her newfound money . . . Angelo remembered now. *That's* what he was supposed to have been thinking about. "Phooey," he said.

"Phooey indeed." Gina began eating.

Rosetta, who lived in the family flat but worked in the business only as a bookkeeper and accountant, turned from her brother to her sister-in-law and back again. "Anything interesting happen today?"

"No," Angelo said.

"As a matter of fact, yes," Gina said.

The bald dumpy man accepted Gina's offer of tea quickly. "Biscuit?" Gina asked as she waited for the kettle to boil. She held out the tin.

He took two, but sat holding them in silence, waiting for the tea.

Most people nibble, Gina thought. This was, perhaps, a man who knew exactly how he liked to do things.

When the tea was in the pot and brewing, Gina took down preliminary details. Among them that Colin Cottard was an accountant who worked and lived locally, although he'd been brought up all around the world as the child of a career soldier.

"So," Gina said once the tea was poured, "what might we be able to do for you, Mr. Cottard?"

"I'm a single man."

After a moment spent waiting for him to continue without a prompt, Gina said, "Yes?"

"And two months ago I decided it was time for me to change that."

"A single man who wants to get married?" Rosetta sat straighter

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in her chair. "An accountant, you said?"

"Who recently found the perfect woman," Gina said.

"Oh." Rosetta relaxed again. Why did it seem so hard to find a good, solid, ordinary man?

But Angelo screwed up his face. "Yet he tells you this, and now he wants something from us?"

"He found the perfect woman, but he lost her."

"Careless," Angelo said.

Rosetta gave Gina's story renewed attention.

"So I began reading lonely-hearts columns," Colin Cottard said. "I expect you think that rather sad."

"I think nothing of the kind," Gina said.

"It's just that in my job . . . It doesn't expose me much to women in a social context."

"No?"

"And anyway, one has to be so careful in the workplace these days." Cottard raised his eyebrows.

He means what? Gina thought. "I don't . . ."

"I mean the fashion for sexual harassment." He held up a hand to allow himself time to be more accurate. "Not the fashion for doing it. The fashion for seeing it everywhere. Or if not everywhere, then where it wasn't seen before."

"I can understand that must make one . . . more careful," Gina said.

"Exactly. After some . . . confusing incidents—nothing involving me, I hasten to add—my firm sent us all on a sensitivity-training course. So now we just don't know where we stand. And there's no point taking chances. Not when one's career is potentially at risk."

"Many people use dating services these days," Gina said, trying to move on. "Newspapers, on-line, introduction agencies. It's much more acceptable than it used to be."

Cottard accepted Gina's reassurances with a silent nod.

"So you answered an ad?"

"Yes. In the newspaper."

"And how did it work out?"

"It was quite, quite enchanting."

For a moment Cottard's face showed he was back on the date. There was a relaxation and pleasure about his expression that had been totally absent till then. But obviously something had gone wrong—he wouldn't be here telling the story otherwise. Gina felt a flash of sympathy for the man.

She said, "You liked her. Didn't she like you?"

"She certainly seemed to. She was refined without being stuffy. Cultured without being humourless. We kept away from the subject of work—hers *and* mine—and concentrated on the moment. She . . . had a good time. I'm sure of it."

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"So what's the problem?" Angelo asked. "He likes her, she likes him. It's a bingo."

"Cottard certainly thought so. But now she won't return his calls."

"No?" Rosetta said.

"Ever since the date, all he gets is her machine."

"How long ago is this date?" Angelo said.

"Ten days."

"And she took his calls before?"

"Yes. When he answered her ad, they talked a few times and then arranged to meet."

Angelo shrugged. "He liked her, but he was wrong about she liked him."

"That happens, trust me," Rosetta said. Her emphatic tone drew looks from both the others. "What?"

Gina said, "But Cottard doesn't think he got it wrong. He did sensitivity training, don't forget."

"So is he sensitive?" Angelo asked.

"He feels that the good time over dinner was unmistakable. Good food, good wine, good talk."

"Did he hit on her?" Rosetta asked.

"He says he was the perfect gentleman. She even kissed him on the cheek when they went to their cars."

"That's a good sign," Angelo said.

"And," Gina said, "when he said, 'Good night,' she said, *'Hasta luego.'*"

"She said *what?*" Rosetta said.

"Hasta luego," Gina said. "It's Spanish for 'till later.' Foreign languages are one of the things they have in common. She's travelled and he's done classes."

"I could do classes." Rosetta looked slightly shocked. "Did I say that out loud?"

"So there's been no *luego* and ten days of *hasta,"* Angelo said. "What I don't get is where we come in."

"The woman clearly doesn't want to socialize further with me. That part I get," Colin Cottard said. "She's already advertising again. In fact, I don't think she ever stopped."

"Where did you first see her ad?"

"In the *Bath Chronicle,* although subsequently I've found that she also advertises in the *Bristol Evening Post,* the *Western Daily Press,* and in *Venue.* Same ad, each place." Cottard pushed a piece of paper across the coffee table.

As Gina took it, she said, "Do have another biscuit."

"I shouldn't, but I'm *that* upset by all this." He took two.

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"What does the ad say?" Rosetta asked.

Gina read, "Independent, attractive lady, thirties, seeks solvent male for good company, good food, and maybe more. Age, appearance, smoking habits immaterial."

"*That's* the ad he answered?" Rosetta said. "Huh!"

Angelo said, "So he got the good company. How about the food?"

"He says the meal was excellent."

"So he didn't get the 'more.' Is there some promise in these ads that it doesn't say?" Angelo looked to his sister.

"What?" Rosetta said.

"They have abbreviations, don't they? SOH to mean 'sense of humour,' yes?"

"What *that* really means is, 'I expect you to laugh at my jokes.'"

"But this 'maybe more.' It is a promise? A code?"

Rosetta shook her head.

"So maybe means maybe," Angelo said. "Hmmm. What about the 'thirties'? Why not say the age?"

Rosetta shook her head at this, too. "Usually they do."

"Cottard didn't say anything about the woman's age, pro or con," Gina said. "Deena Scott is her name."

"And he liked her, this client," Angelo said. "But she didn't like him. So it's end of story, yes?" He frowned as he looked to his wife. "This Cottard. *Is* he a client now?"

"Tell me, Mr. Cottard," Gina said. "What exactly would you like us to do for you?"

"I want you to find out where she lives."

Gina frowned. "She didn't tell you?"

"No. And the phone number I have is a mobile."

"If she didn't volunteer the information . . ."

"I know what you're thinking, but I have no intention of turning up on her doorstep, or stalking her, or sending some vile thing through the post. I did well on the training course. I scored ninety-eight percent on the exam."

"So why are you after the address?"

"Look, Mrs. Lunghi, I know there's no future with Deena. I accept that. But I need to understand what happened, if I'm not to make the same mistake again." Cottard sipped from his tea and reached for another biscuit. "I mean, I *even* whistled in the shower next morning."

"He wants to hire us so he can find out why she didn't like him?" Angelo's face expressed his amazement. "He thinks we can do this?"

"Enough to leave a cash retainer," Gina said.

"It's grey, this area," Angelo said. "Finding where she lives when she didn't want him to know. Hmm."

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"*I* could go ask her," Rosetta said.

"You?" Angelo said.

"Why not? Single woman to single woman." They all knew how infrequently Rosetta got involved in agency cases.

"Why do you think she's single?" Gina asked.

That stopped Rosetta for a moment.

"She advertises, but gives no information about where she lives or works, not even which city. When they talk she gives only a mobile phone. You have to ask why. One reason could be she has a husband."

"And the ads?" Angelo asked.

"She likes meeting new men. Maybe one after the next."

"And sometimes maybe more?"

"Who knows."

Rosetta asked, "Where did they meet?"

"A restaurant in Saltford, off the main road and down by the river," Gina said.

"A private place?"

"Yes."

"And not in Bath or Bristol," Angelo said. "Between. Off the beaten path . . ."

"What did you agree to do for him, Gina?" Rosetta asked.

"I said we'd try to get the address and that the least we would do is deliver his letter for him."

"No stalking, good."

"And to get this address?" Angelo asked. "What do you think? Work from the phone number?"

"I had a different plan in mind," Gina said.

"What plan?"

"Well, she is still advertising, right?"

"Salvatore!" Angelo and Rosetta said simultaneously.

Salvatore Lunghi was the only adult member of the family not to work in the family business. Salvatore was a painter. However, the economic realities of life as a painter meant that he undertook occasional work for the agency. Nevertheless, he retained his independence. They could ask if he wanted to work on a given job and he could say yes or no, even if it was often yes.

He was also the only member of the family not to live in the Walcot Street complex, giving up predictable comfort for a series of bedsits, often in lofts, although all with north light. But that fact, too, didn't mean he avoided, say, family meals. In fact, he often brought guests, known collectively as his models.

However, this evening, as the phone rang, Salvatore was standing before an easel, lit by incandescent light. He did consider not answering, but he wasn't *seeing* anything new for the canvas. The model for his painting was in his mind, not in the flesh. This made

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it harder. The human body was what moved Salvatore, each one so different. He worked best when he could react visually to the real thing. Unfortunately, he was between volunteer models and without the cash for a professional. "Yo?"

"Hey, big boy. Want to make some money?"

Serendipity. "You got a case that needs my magic?"

"If you're not too busy to consider gainful employment," Gina said.

"I . . . could be convinced to come out."

"How would you like to be paid to take a woman out to dinner? An attractive woman in her thirties who isn't fussy."

Gina waited in the kitchen for her children to come home. Though David often stayed after the theoretical eight o'clock end of his Web-site class, he was also a growing boy. He got hungry. And for once Gina hoped that Marie would stay out later than she was supposed to on a school night without permission. That would leave some time with David on his own.

But as luck—or design, who ever knew with kids?—would have it, the children came up the stairs together. They both had paper bags marked with Schwartz's logo.

"Look what I found monging about outside our front door like a lost puppy," Marie said cheerily.

"Woof," David said. "Hi, Mum."

"Hi," Gina said.

"So what do you think?" David said to Marie. "Do you think she would?"

"Your son is asking me for lovelorn advice," Marie said. "Should I help him, or is he still too young?"

"Marie!" David said.

"Helping each other is at the heart of being a family," Gina said. "All of us should definitely help each other."

The children paused, just for a moment, to work out what their mother might be getting at. But when they failed and she didn't follow up, they headed down the hall to eat in their rooms. The last thing Gina heard was David saying, "So do you think she would?"

When Gina and Angelo were in bed and alone at last, Gina said, "I think you'll have to do the surveillance again tomorrow."

"I figured," Angelo said.

"Sal has to be flexible for the Deena woman."

"I know."

"I could cover you for a while. For the morning, say."

Angelo considered. "Okay. Thanks."

"But I want to do the office in the afternoon."

After a pause, Angelo said, "Okay."

"Because I want to close early. Like maybe half an hour."

After a pause, Angelo said, "Why?"

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"So I can catch David when he comes home from school."

Angelo frowned. But David was in the house now, and had been since . . . "Why?"

"About Marie, her money."

Angelo knew there was a problem about Marie and her money, but what did David . . .

"Forget it," Gina said, tired of trying to engage her tired husband. "I'll sort it out myself."

When Salvatore rang the office in the afternoon, it was Gina who answered. "I've made contact with Deena Scott," he said.

"Already?"

"I responded to her *Chronicle* ad this morning and left my number. She called about an hour later."

"Must have liked the sound of your voice."

"So what a treat she's in for when she sees me in the flesh."

"You've arranged a date?"

"Yeah. For dinner tonight. She apologized for seeming forward, but her busy schedule, you see . . ."

"It wouldn't have been your busy schedule, now would it?"

"Me-ow."

"Where are you taking her?"

"She suggested a place she knows in Saltford. Ever heard of the Cummerbund?"

"Only when our client told me that's where she met *him.*"

"Must be a place where she feels comfortable meeting strangers."

"Or she likes it because it's out of the way."

"You think?"

"There's got to be *some* reason to eat in Saltford. I mean, with all the great restaurants there are in Bath, and in Bristol."

Gina was in the kitchen when David arrived home from school. "Hi," David said. Then, "What?" when he saw the stern expression on his mother's face.

"Sit down, please, David."

"What?" She *couldn't* know about the cigarette behind the boiler room. *Could* she? No. It was only today, for crying out loud. Did he smell? Was that it? Could she smell it? He sat.

"Is there something you want to tell me, David?"

"No." Well, he didn't *want* to tell her. Could it be that someone at school saw him and Keven and Steve and called her, called all the parents? Oh God!

"Are you sure about that?"

David racked his mind for another possible offence. Carving his and Fiona's initials in a tree by the canal came to mind. But that was months ago, in the summer hols. Besides, he didn't really like

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Fiona much anymore.

"Because, David, I know for a fact that you know what Marie has been doing to make this money she has now."

Marie? It was about Marie? What a relief.

"I can see by the smirk on your face that you know."

"No, I don't."

"Yes," his mother said. "You *do.*" It was clear that she was very displeased. But how could she be upset with *him?*

"No, I don't," David said, but even he could hear that the tone of his voice was less convincing this time. But if he told his mother, and Marie found out it came from him . . .

Gina sat back in her chair and folded her arms. "Just tell me, David. Now. It will save us *all* a lot of trouble."

Us "all"? She was threatening to punish him somehow if he didn't tell. But that wasn't *fair.* And besides, if he told, Marie would tell Cassi and Jackie and Natasha and Aimee and his name would be mud with them all. And then there would be no chance at all that Jojo would go out with him, *ever.*

David jumped up. "Stop trying to *bully* me," he shouted. "You're always trying to make me your spy. Well, you ought to be your own spy, the business you're in. And I'm not going to be your spy anymore and I don't know anything anyway."

And he ran from the kitchen to his own room and slammed the door behind him. But even as he dived onto his bed and lay face-down he knew that with his heart beating the way it was, he wouldn't be able to resist telling the whole thing, and about the cigarette, too, when his mother followed him into his room. Fighting was so *awful.* Resisting her so impossible.

She would be there any second. He put his pillow on the back of his head so that he would make a dramatic picture for her when she arrived to scold him, and then punish him. As long as she didn't forbid him to carry on with the Web-site class. Oh God, she wouldn't do *that,* would she?

It would be *so* unfair. Because Marie was *always* running away to her room when she wanted to break off a conversation that might get her into trouble. And she not only always got away with it, she bragged about how she'd throw a fit to her friends. How sometimes she added screams, just for effect.

Several minutes passed before it dawned on David that his mother had *not* followed him to his room.

Was it possible that she wasn't going to?

Was it possible that he—David—had thrown a fit and *gotten away with it?*

Beneath his pillow, David began to giggle.

Gina was still in the kitchen when Angelo came in. "We have to talk," she said.

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"Sure, baby," Angelo said.

The "baby" caught Gina so much by surprise that she was shaken from her own agenda.

"Guess what happened today?" Angelo pirouetted, and then put the case with the agency camcorder down on the table before his wife. "Guess what *finally* happened . . ."

"Shriver came out?"

Angelo beamed.

"He came out and you got him." It was the object of the long surveillance.

"Not only came out, *in* the bright sun where we could see him clearly," Angelo said. "He forgot something and ran back up the steps to the house." He patted the camcorder again. "*Ran.* And it's all in here."

"You checked?"

"I played it back as soon as he got into his car."

"He drove?" The case was an accident claim in which the "victim," Shriver, purported to be all but totally disabled because of injuries to his spine.

"I'll put it on tape and make a backup," Angelo said. "And then we party."

"Yes. All right. Of course." Gina decided to defer the difficult conversation for a while. Let Angelo enjoy the moment.

But he said, "What do we need to talk about? Marie?"

Well . . . "Yes."

"No luck from David?"

"No."

"I guess we better follow her, then."

"I think maybe we'll have to." The cloud that had blotted Gina's day was suddenly relieved. A rule for years had been never to use detection techniques or equipment inside the family. But this time she'd tried every other avenue she could think of. She'd expected her husband to have difficulty about taking an unprecedented step.

But Angelo was having difficulty with nothing. "I'll be free tomorrow," he said. "Fa-la-la. How about I pick up the trail as she leaves school?"

When he found the restaurant in Saltford, Salvatore was surprised how posh it looked. No Michelin stars, but despite being well off the main road it was well-presented and inviting. Chances were that the food would be decent. Whether he'd be able to say the same of the woman was another matter.

Client Cottard had been seriously smitten with . . . with . . . with *Deena.* Deena, Deena, Deena. Must remember. Deena *Scott,* who on the phone had sounded quite nice—rather like the restaurant. Not only the sound of her voice but the care with which she spoke. "Look, Salvatore," she'd said, "I don't often do what I'm about to,

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but do you think we could meet for dinner tonight? I feel really dumb, and it must sound like I'm desperate, which I'm not, honestly. Usually I'd wait till I felt I knew you better, but you sound *so* nice, so gentlemanly, so . . . What can I say? So *together.* And it's the only evening I have free for a week."

After checking his diary Salvatore confirmed that he too could do tonight, so together it was.

Marie was on the phone to Cassi. "It's not like she said anything when I came in, but I could tell by her face. Then all through dinner she was bottling it up, like any minute her cork would pop. The only reason she didn't is that Dad's happy about some work thing. But *her* . . . She's getting on my wick. She really is."

"I *so* know what you mean," Cassi said. "It's like they think they own you."

"Well, she doesn't." Marie stamped her foot. "In fact, let's go out again."

"Now? Tonight?"

"Why not?" Marie thought about "why not" after she said it. But answer came there none, as Aimee said today, which sounded pretty cool. Marie's grandparents weren't due back from London for at least two days. And no one from Cassi's family ever went *anywhere.* Cassi herself hadn't been to London more than twice in her life, poor thing.

When she and Cassi had saved up some more money they could change all that. There could be days out, to ride the Millennium Wheel. Or nights out . . . "See you in fifteen minutes outside Doolally's," Marie said. "Sooner if I don't have to pick a fight."

David sat with his face even closer than usual to the computer screen. Despite this, his attention wavered. Every few minutes his mind went back to the exchange with his mother.

His success at being able to avoid her previously irresistible pressure still made him grin, even giggle. He'd entered new territory. Never before had he picked a fight to escape confessing something he didn't want to say.

Life was going to be different now. Did he *look* different? Would he be able to see it in a mirror?

David caught bits of his reflection on the glass of the monitor's screen. Was he, at last, a *real* teenager?

"Of course you may go out," Gina said, "as long as your homework's done."

"Done and dusted," Marie said. At least to the extent of her having planned slots in her morning classes to work on it. That portion of her homework she planned to do at all. It's not like every bit of homework was important, just because some silly old

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teacher got a whim and assigned it. Everyone knew *that.* Everyone who wasn't *ancient.* Old people were so rigid, too unsubtle to understand the fine points. So it wasn't a lie to say that her homework was done. It was just a simplification to save her mother needless anxiety.

"Fine."

"I won't be late," Marie volunteered, in order to reward her mother's cooperative mood.

"Well, well, well," Salvatore said as he was shown to the table reserved by Deena Scott.

"You must be Salvatore."

"I certainly am. And you're Deena."

"Please, sit down."

He sat, but looked around. "Where are the cameras?"

"What cameras?"

"Because this has to be one of those television programs."

"I don't understand."

"You're gorgeous. And it makes no sense at all that you'd be advertising to meet men."

"Well, thank you for the compliment."

"It's not just flattery. I'm surprised, that's all. And I'm not complaining."

"Perhaps you don't know much about the life of a modern businesswoman."

"Perhaps I don't. But I'm eager to learn."

"And I'd tell you all about it, if only it were interesting," Deena Scott said with a sigh. "But my hope is that we'll find more entertaining and exciting topics to talk about this evening."

"Let's give it a try." Salvatore lit his first full-wattage smile of the night.

Eventually David realized that he was hungry. It hadn't crossed his mind till now, what with his preoccupation with the confrontation with his mother. What time could it be?

He checked the time in the corner of his computer screen. Nearly quarter past eight. But nobody had called him for dinner!

Had they and he didn't hear?

No, he was sure that nobody called.

Was there significance to that? There must be. They always called.

And he always came.

Was she going to starve the information out of him? Was that it? Well, that was *really* unfair. He ought to be allowed to decide for himself what he said and what he didn't and *still* get fed. He was a member of the family, after all. It's not like Marie was ever denied food when she finally came out after throwing a fit.

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Of course he hadn't been denied food either. Yet.

And he *was* hungry.

David went to the door of his room. He listened. It sounded like the television was on in the living room. But that could be Auntie Rose.

He couldn't hear anyone talking in the kitchen.

He opened the door a crack, ready to slam it again if someone was lurking outside.

The corridor was empty. He ventured out.

The kitchen was empty. But there was a note in his mother's handwriting on the table. "David, your father and I are at the Bell having a drink. There's plenty of food in the fridge. Help yourself. Hope you're feeling better."

Feeling better? What did that mean? Was she saying that he'd just had a moment of not being himself, that everything would be the same again after he came to his senses and spilled the beans?

Well! How offensive was *that!* As if what had happened wasn't a serious matter of principle. As if she expected him to return to being her spy.

Well, she'd soon find out. For sure. And have a surprise. Huh!

David stood, indignant, holding the note, ready to return to his room.

But it wouldn't compromise his principles to take a full plate back there with him, would it? No. He went to the fridge.

After the appetizer, Deena Scott excused herself to go to the ladies' room. It left Salvatore to reflect on how much he'd enjoyed talking with this woman so far. She was an intriguing combination of being forward but modest, tasteful but lively. She was maybe a little more conventional-looking than he usually chose for himself, but she was definitely a woman of quality. And more attractive in all the important ways than he'd ever expected to find in a woman who advertised in the *Bath Chronicle*'s "Find a Partner" page.

Maybe the bad rep of lonely-hearts ads was undeserved. Salvatore's success with women might be legend but, like any success, it took work to sustain. He might even consider advertising there himself. "Painter seeks model for work on canvas, and maybe more." Hmm. Maybe more, indeed.

When Deena returned to the table, Salvatore stood and held the chair for her. She thanked him with a nod of the head and a flicker of a smile.

Tasteful, but not uninterested . . .

"Marie?"

Marie turned in the direction of the voice that had addressed her. She couldn't believe what her ears had already told her. She found herself face-to-face with her grandmother.

Behind, she saw her grandfather struggle to move a suitcase

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over the rough pavement that led to the taxi rank in front of the railway station. The bag had wheels, but it kept falling over.

"Hi, Gran," Marie said. "It's just wonderful to see you."

Mama Lunghi squinted in the dim light. "But you couldn't know we would be here, Marie. Nobody knew today, much less now."

"But it's still wonderful to see you. I've missed you." Marie's mind was whirring, trying to figure out where this was going to go.

"We didn't know until it happened. How could you be here?"

Cassi filled the vacuum as she ran from near the front of the queue of people waiting for taxis. "Have you got change, Marie? I got two and he gave me a five." Then Cassi saw who Marie was talking to. "Oh, hi, Mrs. Lunghi. How you doing?"

After the date, Salvatore decided to report on his evening rather than wait until morning. But when he appeared in the family kitchen Gina, who was clearing up, seemed mildly surprised. "Before ten? Losing your touch?"

"What was it, exactly, that you hired me to do?" Salvatore asked. "I don't remember anything about 'touch.'"

"So what happened? Was she a woofer?"

"Not in the slightest. Deena Scott is attractive, charming, refined, and she wasn't shy about ordering the most expensive items on the menu."

"How shy was she about paying for them?"

"She allowed me to pick up the tab, like the gentleman I so obviously am."

"When you're on expenses."

"I bet she could get used to pizzas," Salvatore said.

"Oh yeah?"

"If she was really hooked on a guy. Yeah, I bet she could."

"And is she hooked on you?"

"No." He smiled enigmatically.

"The expense account only runs to the one date, Sally."

"The lady and I have made no plans."

"So, did you manage to get an idea of what she didn't like about Colin Cottard?"

"No."

"No?"

"She wanted to focus on *us* and *now,* not on her dating history. Or, if it comes to that, anything much about herself at all."

"Hmm," Gina said. "And did you get her address?"

"I asked, but she said she didn't feel comfortable giving it to me yet."

"My, my. Well, I guess you're not as young as you used to be."

"My age, or other attributes, had nothing to do with it."

"Immaterial?"

"So after the date I followed her."

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"Good. And?"

"And she tried to lose me."

Gina looked to see if her brother-in-law was joking.

"For real," Salvatore said. "I wasn't obvious, and I can't be sure she didn't spot me, but she definitely engaged in evasive manoeuvring. Her road skills are considerable."

"Sufficient to shake her tail?"

"She certainly wagged it."

But it was at exactly this point that Gina and Salvatore were interrupted by loud noises from downstairs. The door to the street banged open, and they heard people talking.

"Such kerfuffle." This was Marie's grandfather, father of Angelo, Salvatore, and Rosetta, and founder of the Lunghi Detective Agency. "You'd think she robbed a bank."

"More like she's a whore," his wife said.

"Grandma!" This was Marie.

"Where is your mother, young lady?" Mama asked. "At home, this hour, I hope."

By now Salvatore and Gina were at the top of the stairs. "Mama? Papa?" Behind them, David, Angelo, and Rosetta were in the hall on their way to the kitchen, alerted to something happening by all the noise.

Salvatore turned to Gina. "I thought Mama and Papa weren't back till day after tomorrow."

They weren't, but Gina was more concerned with something else. "Marie?" she said. "What about a whore?"

"Who's a whore?" Angelo said.

David couldn't believe his ears.

"It's all a storm in a teacup," Marie insisted once everyone squeezed into places around the kitchen table.

"With my own eyes, I saw it," Mama said.

"You saw me standing in a taxi queue!" Marie said. "That's all you saw."

"A taxi queue where?" Gina asked.

"Where were you going in this taxi?" Angelo asked.

Marie stood up. "I don't have to take this!"

"Sit down," Gina said forcefully.

The crowd blocked any easy escape from the room so Marie sat, with a *very* deep sigh. She sighed a second time.

"You were queuing for a taxi?" Gina said. "So where were you planning to go?"

"Nowhere," Marie said.

"We've had more than enough attitude from you, young lady," Angelo said.

"I was going *nowhere!*"

"What's this nowhere?" Papa asked. He least of everybody pre-

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sent felt there was any importance in where Marie had been discovered. "She was where she was. She was there to meet us."

Marie considered trying to float this, but realized it would sink like a stone. Nevertheless she said, "*Thank you,* Grandpa."

"What thank? So do we get a cup of tea with this impromptu family meeting, or what?"

Rosetta got up. "Who wants tea?"

All the adult hands went up.

Then Gina said, "*Why* were you in the taxi queue in front of the railway station, Marie?"

The room went silent. All eyes were on her. They waited. "I wasn't going anywhere."

"And?" Gina said.

"I was just queuing."

The adults glanced at one another, except for the Old Man. "Darjeeling, I think, Rosetta," he said. "This time of night."

"Okay, Papa."

"*Why* were you queuing?" Gina asked.

Another silence. "Oh hell," Marie said, as she capitulated. "Trains come in, especially during the rush hour from London, and they're really full."

"This is true," the Old Man said. "I thought maybe we would have to stand. But then there was a seat, and then a young man got up so we could sit together." In the silence that followed this he looked around. "Huh!"

"Marie?" Gina said.

"All *right.* When the trains are full a lot of people want taxis, and the queue waiting for them is long. Cassi and I and some of our friends stand in the queues and then when we're near the front we sell our places to people who are in a big hurry. All right? Happy now?" She stood up and made her way to the door to the hall. "Can I go to my room now, please? I have homework to do."

Later, Gina, Angelo, Salvatore, and Rosetta sat together in the living room sharing a bottle of wine. Mama and Papa were safely reinstalled in their flat at the top of the house. The children were both in their rooms.

"Marie will go far," Salvatore said. "What an amazing kid."

Angelo said, "Do we believe this taxi queuing?"

"Oh, I think so," Gina said. "The question is, do we try to stop it?"

The parents were silent, not having a clear answer.

"Why stop it?" Salvatore asked. "It's not illegal."

"But is it dangerous?" Gina asked.

"I think people in the queues will get fed up with it," Rosetta said. "Once or twice, cute girls, being entrepreneurial, but if every time they get off a train they're there, people will just push past them."

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That made sense to the others. "If the railway staff don't clamp down," Angelo said.

"Maybe we could go to the station sometime, and watch how it all works," Gina said.

That, too, didn't seem the worst idea in the world.

Then Rosetta said, "So, Sally, how did it go with the lonely heart?"

"Ah," Gina said, "she tried to shake you."

"Yep, she tried to shake my tail," Salvatore said. "But I wasn't having any of it, nossir. Don't want nobody messin' with *my* tail."

"So you *did* find out where she lived, this Deena Scott?" Gina said.

"That *was* what you hired me to do, wasn't it?" Salvatore said. He flashed them a big smile.

Colin Cottard was amazed. "She lives behind the restaurant?"

"That's what we learned, Mr. Cottard," Gina said. "There's a small flat at the back."

"But . . . but . . ." Cottard couldn't get his head around how what he was hearing fit with what he had experienced. "But after dinner, she drove off. I remember that distinctly."

"In a small green Nissan," Gina said. "Yes, she did the same last night after the meal with our operative."

"But . . . *why?*"

"This client Cottard," Salvatore said, "what did Deena Scott eat at the dinner with him? Do you know?"

"I . . . I think I have it in the file," Gina said. "Or I could ask him tomorrow."

"Is it important?" Rosetta asked.

"Because I've got an idea what this might be all about," Salvatore said.

"What idea?" Angelo said.

"I think there's a question worth asking that we haven't asked yet." Salvatore spread his hands. The gesture invited the others to work out what Salvatore was thinking.

The others considered.

Angelo poured the last of the wine into his own glass. "I can't think of any question at the moment except shall I open another bottle of wine?"

"Go on," Gina said.

"But first think about what we know," Salvatore said. "This woman advertises for men. She suggests a meal in this restaurant in Saltford and she lives behind it."

"I know!" Rosetta said. "I know the question!"

"The question we asked ourselves," Gina said to Colin Cottard, "was this: Who *owns* the restaurant, this Cummerbund?"

"Who owns it?"

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"And this morning we found out that it is owned by a company called Deescott Holdings."

Cottard absorbed this, then spoke slowly as he spelled out the significance of what he'd just been told. "*She* owns the restaurant? But why . . . ?" And then, "It's all to boost the takings?"

"We wanted to talk with you before we spend more of your money, trying, say, to establish that the restaurant isn't doing very well. But our theory is that Deena Scott advertises in the newspapers so that she can get men to take her to the Cummerbund and pay for the top-price menu items that she orders."

Cottard sat before Gina in stunned silence.

"But doing something like that is . . . It's so *unfair,*" Rosetta spluttered. "Because the people who answer those ads, they do it in good faith, most of them."

"Fraud we could get her on, maybe?" Angelo suggested.

"I doubt it's illegal," Salvatore said. "But can we take out a civil suit for misrepresentation? Because, I tell you, bro, I feel really *used.*"

"I wonder what our client is going to feel," Gina said.

"I can tell you what *I'd* feel," Rosetta said. "I'd be really, really angry."

Colin Cottard's silence persisted so long that Gina began to worry about how anger in this organized man might manifest itself. Had it been a mistake to tell him where the woman who'd trifled with his feelings lived? It was almost impossible to explain her actions without doing so, but . . . Had the Lunghis been so pleased with their detective work that they had irresponsibly triggered a potential crime, even a tragedy?

"Despite the fact that we have told you where Deena Scott lives . . ." Gina began.

But Colin Cottard held up a hand. The look on his face was not an angry one. Gina stopped to hear what he had to say.

"If a business, such as a restaurant, is in difficulty, sometimes the sensitive intervention of a trained financial specialist can work wonders."

"A trained financial specialist?" Gina said.

"Yes."

"Such as yourself?"

"So, if you would be so kind, Mrs. Lunghi, I would like you to do one final thing for me in this matter."

"Which is?"

"What I asked you to do in the first place—deliver a letter for me to Deena. Because I think there might just be a future for us after all." ●

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BULLETS

by Peter Lovesey

"You can remove the body."

"Was it definitely . . . ?"

"Suicide, I'd stake my life on it," said Inspector Carew, a forceful man. "Single bullet to the head. Gun beside him. Ex-army fellow who didn't return his weapon when the war ended. This must be the third or fourth case I've seen. The world has changed too much for them—the wireless, a Labour government, the bright young things. All these poor fellows have got is their memories of the war, and who wants to think about that?"

"He didn't leave a note."

"Are you questioning my conclusion?"

"Absolutely not, Inspector."

"I suggest you get on with your job, then. I'm going to speak to the family."

The family consisted of the dead man's widow, Emily Flanagan, a pretty, dark-haired woman not much over thirty, and her father, whose name was Russell. They were sitting at the kitchen table in 7 Albert Street, their small suburban house in Teddington. They had a bottle of brandy between them.

The inspector accepted a drink and knocked it back in one swig. When talking to the recently bereaved, he needed all the lubrication he could get. He gave them his findings and explained that there would need to be a postmortem to confirm the cause, obvious as it was. "You didn't find a note, I suppose?" he said.

Emily Flanagan shook her head.

"Did anything occur that could have induced him to take his own life? Bad news? An argument?"

Mrs. Flanagan looked across at her father.

"No argument," the old man said. "And that's beyond dispute."

Mrs. Flanagan clapped her hands twice and said, "Good one, Daddy."

A starred *PW* review for Peter Lovesey's new novel *The Circle* (Soho Press, 6/05)! Inspector Mallin, a supporting character in Mr. Lovesey's Peter Diamond series, gets the star part this time, in a book in which "Lovesey's trademark dark humor and playfulness are very much in evidence, as he presents a crafty fair-play puzzle replete with quirky, three-dimensional characters." Let's hope we'll see Mallin in an *EQMM* story soon!

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Inspector Carew didn't follow what was going on, except that these two seemed more cheerful than they should.

"As a matter of fact," Mrs. Flanagan said, "Patrick was in a better mood than I've seen him for some time." The ends of her mouth turned up in what wasn't quite a smile, more a comment on the vagary of fate.

"This was last night?"

"And for some days. He was singing 'Horsey, Keep Your Tail Up' in the bathroom."

"Bracing himself?" said the inspector. His theory of depression was looking shaky.

"What do you mean, 'bracing himself'?"

"For the, em . . ."

"Felo-de-se," said old Mr. Russell. "Felo-de-se—fellow's sad day."

"Daddy, please," said Mrs. Flanagan.

The inspector decided that the old man had drunk too much brandy. This wasn't a comfortable place to be. As soon as he'd got the essential details, he was leaving. "I understand you were both woken by the shot."

"About midnight, yes," the widow said, glancing at her fingernails. She was holding up remarkably.

"You came downstairs and found him in his office?"

She nodded. "He called it his den. And Father came in soon after."

"He'd given no indication of taking his own life?"

"He liked his own life, Inspector."

"What was his work?"

"He was an actor. He was currently playing in *Bulldog Drummond* at the Richmond Theatre. It was only a small role as a gangster, but he did it to perfection. They'll miss him dreadfully."

The inspector was tempted to ask, "And will you?" But he kept his lips buttoned. *"Bulldog Drummond.* I can't say I've read it."

"It has a subtitle," said Mrs. Flanagan. "Daddy, can you remember the subtitle?"

" 'The Adventures of a Demobilized Officer Who Found Peace Dull.' "

"I knew he'd know it," she said. "Being housebound, Daddy has more time for reading than the rest of us. 'A Demobilized Officer Who Found Peace Dull.' "

This was closer to Inspector Carew's diagnosis. "Poignant, in the circumstances."

"Oh, I don't agree. Patrick's life was anything but dull."

"So last night he would have returned late from the theatre?"

"About half-past eleven, usually."

"Perhaps he was overtired."

"Patrick?" she said with an inappropriate laugh. "He was inexhaustible."

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"Did he have a difficult war?"

"Didn't every soldier? I thought he'd put all that behind him."

"Apparently not, unless there was something else." The inspector was beginning to revise his theory. "Forgive me for asking this, Mrs. Flanagan. Was your marriage entirely successful?"

The lips twitched again. "I dare say he had lapses."

"Lapses," said old Mr. Russell. "Like lasses on laps."

This piece of wit earned no more than a frown from his daughter. She said to the inspector, "Patrick was an actor. Enough said?"

"Didn't it anger you?"

"We had tiffs if I caught him out, as I sometimes did."

"You seem to treat it lightly, if I may say so."

"Because they were minor indiscretions, kissing and canoodling."

The inspector wasn't certain of the meaning of "canoodling," but he guessed it didn't amount to adultery. "Not a cause for suicide, then?"

"Good Lord, no."

"And how was the balance of his mind, would you say?"

"*Are you asking me if he was mad?*"

"When he shot himself, yes."

"I wasn't there when he shot himself, but I think it highly unlikely. He never lost control."

"Well, then," the inspector said, preparing to leave, "it will be for the coroner to decide. He may wish to visit the scene himself, so I'm leaving the, em, den as it is, apart from the, em . . ."

"Mortal remains?" old Mr. Russell suggested.

"So please don't tidy anything up. Leave it exactly as it is." He picked up his hat and left.

Mrs. Flanagan had barely started her next brandy when the doorbell rang again. "Damn. Who's that?" she said.

Her father wobbled to the door and admitted a fat, bald man in a cassock. He smelt of tobacco. "Father Montgomery," he said.

"Should we know you?" she asked.

"I was padre to your husband in France. I'm the incumbent of St. Saviour's in Richmond. I heard from one of my congregation that he'd been gathered, so I came at once to see what I could do."

"Very little," said Mrs. Flanagan. " 'Gathered' isn't the word I would use. He killed himself. That's a lost soul in your religion, isn't it?"

The priest sighed heavily. "That *is* distressing. I know he wasn't a regular worshiper, but he was brought up in the Church of Rome. He professed himself a Catholic when pressed."

Old Mr. Russell said in a parade-ground chant, "Fall out the Jews and Catholics."

"Exactly, sir. So I do have a concern over the destiny of poor Patrick's soul. Is it certain?"

"If you call putting a gun to your head and pulling the trigger

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certain, I would say it is," said Mrs. Flanagan, wanting to be rid of this visitor. "We've had the police here and they confirm it."

"His service revolver, I suppose? How I wish the army had been more responsible in collecting all the weapons they issued. May I see the room?"

"Is that necessary?"

"I would like to remove all doubt from my mind that this was suicide."

"You have a doubt?"

His eyes flicked upwards. "I have a duty, my dear."

She showed him into Patrick's den, a small room with a desk surrounded by bookshelves. Her father shuffled in after them.

The body had been removed, but otherwise the room was just as the police had seen it, with the revolver lying on the desk.

"Please don't touch anything," Mrs. Flanagan said.

The priest made a performance of linking his thumbs behind his back. He leaned over and peered at the gun. "Service issue, as I expected," he said. "Did the police examine the chambers for bullets?"

"Empty. He only needed the one."

"Where did he keep the gun?"

"In the bottom drawer—but don't open it."

Father Montgomery had little option but to look about him at the bookshelves. There were plays by Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. "Did he act in any of these?"

"No. He collected them for personal reading. He was a well-read man."

"Well-read," said old Mr. Russell. "Oh, essay, essay, essay."

"Father adores his word play," Mrs. Flanagan said. "Not one of your very best, Daddy."

The books continued to interest the priest. There was a shelf of detective stories above the drama section featuring works by Conan Doyle, E.W. Hornung, and G.K. Chesterton. Three by the author who called himself "Sapper" were lying horizontally above the others. One was *Bulldog Drummond,* the novel of the play the dead man had appeared in. On another high shelf were some volumes the priest wished he hadn't noticed, among them *Married Love,* by Marie Stopes. But his eyes were drawn inexorably to *Family Limitation,* by Margaret Sanger—not for its provocative title but for the round hole he noticed in the binding.

"Might I ask for a dispensation to handle one of the books?"

"Why?" asked Mrs. Flanagan.

"Because I think I see a bullet hole through the spine."

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" said Mrs. Flanagan, forgetting herself. "Where?"

The priest unclasped his hands and pointed. "Do you mind?" He reached for the book and removed it. Sure enough, there was a

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scorched round hole penetrating this book and its neighbour, *The Psychology of Sex,* by Havelock Ellis. "Didn't the police remark on this?"

"They didn't notice it. What can it mean?"

"Presumably, that two shots were fired and this one missed. If you look, the bullet penetrated the wood behind the books. Do you recall hearing two shots?"

"I couldn't say for sure. I was asleep. I thought it was one shot that disturbed me, but I suppose there could have been two."

"And this was when?"

"About midnight, according to the clock in my room. Daddy, can you recall two shots?"

"Aldershot and Bagshot," said the waggish Mr. Russell.

"It's a puzzle," said the priest, rotating his head, his eyes taking in all of the books. He replaced the damaged volume and turned his attention to the floor. "There should be two spent cartridges unless someone removed them."

"Do you think you're a better detective than the police?" Mrs. Flanagan said, becoming irritated.

"No, but I work for a Higher Authority." He pushed his foot under the edge of the carpet and rolled the corner back towards the chair. He couldn't be accused of touching anything; his feet had to go somewhere. "Hey ho, what's this?"

Under the carpet was a magazine.

"Leave it," said Mrs. Flanagan.

"We're allowed to look," said Father Montgomery, bending low. The magazine was the current issue of *John Bull,* that patriotic weekly edited by Horatio Bottomley. The number seven was scribbled on the cover in pencil.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" said old Mr. Russell.

"Is that your magazine, Daddy?" Mrs. Flanagan asked him. "You said it was missing."

"No, mine's upstairs."

"We have it delivered every Thursday. Father does the competition," Mrs. Flanagan explained. "What's the competition called, Daddy?"

"Bullets."

"Right." She gave her half-smile. "Ironic. He sometimes wins a prize. They give a list of phrases and the readers are invited to add an original comment in no more than four words. Give us an example, Daddy."

"'Boarding House Philosophy: Let Bygones Be Rissoles.'"

"Nice one. What about one for the church? What's that famous one?"

"'Wedding March: Aisle Altar Hymn.'"

"That won five hundred pounds for someone before the war. Daddy's best effort won him twenty-five, but he keeps trying.

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You're sure this isn't your copy, Daddy?"

"Mine's upstairs, I said."

"All right, don't get touchy. We'd best keep this under the carpet in case it's important, but I can't think why." Mrs. Flanagan nudged the carpet back in place with a pointed patent-leather toecap, wanting to hasten the priest's departure. "Is there anything else we can do for you, Father Montgomery?"

"Not for the present, except . . ."

"Except what?"

"If I may, I'd like to borrow your father's *John Bull.*"

"I'll fetch it now," said the old man.

And he did.

Father Montgomery returned to Richmond and went backstage at the theatre. It was still early in the afternoon and there was no matinée, but some of the actors were on stage rehearsing next week's production.

He spotted the person who had first informed him of Patrick Flanagan's sudden death. Brendan was painting scenery, a fine, realistic bay window with a sea view behind.

"My dear boy," the priest said, "I'm so pleased to catch you here."

"What can I do for you, Father?"

"I've come from the house of poor Patrick Flanagan, rest his soul."

"We're heartbroken, Father. He was a lovely man."

"Indeed. Would you happen to know if he had a lady friend at all?"

"You mean Daisy Truelove, Father?"

"I suppose I do, if you say so. Where would I find her?"

"She's in the ladies' dressing room."

"And how would I coax her out of there?"

"You could try knocking on the door and saying, 'A gentleman for Miss Daisy.'"

He tried, and it worked. She flung open the door, a flurry of fair, curly hair and cheap scent, her eyes shining in anticipation. "Hello, darling—oh, my hat." She'd spotted the clerical collar.

"Miss Truelove?"

She nodded.

"The friend of Patrick Flanagan?"

The pretty face creased at the name. "Poor Patrick, yes."

"Would you mind telling me if you saw him yesterday evening?"

"Why, yes, Father. He was in the play, and so am I. I'm Lola, the gangster's moll."

"After it was over?"

"I saw him then, too. Some of us went for a drink at the Star and Garter. Patrick ordered oysters and champagne. He said he'd recently come into some money."

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"Oysters and champagne until when?"

"About half-past eleven."

"And then?"

She hesitated. "Do you really need to know?"

"Think of me as a vessel."

"A ship, Father?"

He blinked. "Not exactly. More like a receptacle for anything you can tell me in confidence."

"You want to hear my confession?"

"Not unless you have something to confess."

She bit her lip. "We went on a river steamer."

"At night?"

"It was moored by the bridge. It had fairy lights and music and there was dancing. So romantic. He ordered more bubbly, and it must have gone to my head. We finally got home about four in the morning. I'd better say that again. *I* got home about four in the morning. We said goodnight at the door of my lodgings. There was nothing improper, Father. Well, nothing totally improper, if you know what I mean."

"How was his mood?"

"His mood?"

"Was he happy when he left you?"

"Oh, dear!" she said, her winsome young features creasing in concern again. "I'm afraid he wasn't. He wanted to come in with me. He offered to take off his shoes and tiptoe upstairs, but I wouldn't risk upsetting the landlady. I pushed him away and shut the door in his face. Do you think that's why he killed himself?"

"No, I don't," said Father Montgomery. "I don't believe he killed himself at all."

"You mean my conscience is clear?"

"I have no way of telling what's on your conscience, my dear, but I'm sure you did the right thing at the end of the evening."

Inspector Carew was far from happy at being dragged back to 7 Albert Street by a priest he'd never met, but the mention of murder couldn't be ignored.

"The wife lied to us both," Father Montgomery said as they were being driven to Teddington. "She insisted that the shooting was at midnight, but I have a female witness who says Patrick Flanagan was with her in Richmond until four in the morning."

"So what?" said the inspector. "Emily Flanagan has her pride. She won't want to admit that her wayward husband preferred to spend the night with some other filly."

"She wasn't exactly grieving."

"True. I noted her demeanour. Maybe she's not sorry he's dead. It doesn't make her a murderess."

"There's money behind this," the priest said. "A man who can

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splash out on champagne and oysters at the Star and Garter is doing too well for a jobbing actor with a wife and father-in-law to support."

"We checked the bank account," the inspector said, pleased to demonstrate how thorough he'd been. "They have a modest income, but two days before his death he withdrew most of what they had, about sixty pounds. And so would I, if I was planning to do myself in. I'd have a binge and a night out with a girl before I pulled the trigger. Wouldn't you?"

"I don't go out with girls and I wouldn't pull the trigger," said Father Montgomery. "Neither is permitted."

They drew up at the Flanagans' house in Teddington. Emily Flanagan opened the door, saw them together, and said, "Holy Moses!"

In the kitchen, the brandy bottle was empty. Old Mr. Russell was asleep in a rocking chair in front of the stove.

"No need to disturb him," Inspector Carew said. "This concerns you, ma'am. An apparent discrepancy in what you told me. You said the fatal shot was fired at midnight."

"Or thereabouts," said Mrs. Flanagan.

"Our latest information places your husband on a river steamer in Richmond at midnight."

"The heel! What was he doing there?"

"Dancing with an actress until nearly four in the morning."

"I'm not surprised," she said, failing to appreciate what an admission this was. "Which baggage was it this time?"

"Do you admit you lied to me?"

"How could I have known what he was doing in Richmond?"

"The time. You lied about the time."

"'Thereabouts' is what I said. What difference does an hour or two make to you? I guessed he was entertaining some little trollop on the last night of his life, but the world doesn't need to know, does it? Allow me some dignity when I walk behind his coffin, Inspector."

"Did you know he emptied his bank account and treated his actor friends to oysters and champagne?"

"Did he, the rotter?"

"You don't seem overly concerned."

"He left no will. As his nearest and dearest I'll inherit everything he ever owned, including this house."

"Not if you're hanged for murder, madam."

"What?" For the first time in all this sorry business, she looked alarmed.

Father Montgomery raised his hands to urge restraint on both sides. "Before we go any further, Inspector, why don't I show you what I discovered in the den?"

Emily Flanagan, muttering mild expletives, followed them into

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the room where the body had been discovered. The priest pointed out the bullet hole in the books and remarked that it was unlikely that the victim had held a gun to his head and missed. "I suggest that someone else was holding the gun, someone who waited through the small hours of the night for him to come in and then pointed it at him and brought him in here and sat him at his own desk, where it would look as if he chose to die. I suggest there was a struggle and he deflected the first shot, but the second was fired with the gun to his head."

"A crime of passion, then," said the inspector.

"No. Let me show you something else." He rolled back the carpet and revealed the copy of *John Bull*. "You can pick it up," he told the inspector. "Take note of the number seven scribbled on the top right corner. The magazine was delivered to this house as usual. It was Mr. Russell's copy, but Patrick Flanagan grabbed it the day it was pushed through the letterbox and hid it here. Now turn to page thirty-eight, headed *Bullets,* and look at this week's thousand-pound winner."

The inspector read aloud, *"Mr. P.F., of Teddington, Middlesex.* That's Patrick Flanagan. No wonder he was out celebrating."

"But Patrick didn't do the Bullets!" said Mrs. Flanagan in awe.

"Right, it was your father who provided the winning entry. Being unable to walk more than a few steps, he relied on Patrick to post it for him. Patrick ripped open the envelope and entered the competition under his own name. I dare say he'd played the trick before, because the old man was known to have a flare for Bullets."

"They're second nature to him," said Mrs. Flanagan.

"Patrick delayed paying in the cheque. I'm sure we'll find it in here somewhere. He hid the magazine under the carpet so that your father shouldn't find out, but the old chap managed to get hold of a copy."

"He sent me out to buy it."

"And when he saw the competition page, he was outraged. The main object of his life was to win that competition. He'd been robbed of his moment of glory by a shabby trick from his son-in-law. So last night he went to the study and collected the gun and lay in wait. The rest you know."

The inspector let out a breath so deep and so long it seemed to empty his lungs. "You're clever, Father."

"A man's soul was at stake, Inspector."

"Not a good man."

"It's not for us to judge."

Mrs. Flanagan said, "What was the winning entry?"

"Well, the phrase was 'A Policeman's Lot.'"

"'A Lawfully Big Adventure,'" said the murderer with pride, entering the room. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

NAKED FLAME

by Cheryl Rogers

Five years ago, Australian Cheryl Rogers won a summer fiction contest sponsored by the English magazine *Woman's Realm*, and her winning entry was published. Normally, this would exclude the author from our Department of First Stories, but her contest winner was a romance, not a mystery, so we've made an exception. She's created a fireball of a heroine for her mystery debut. Be prepared for lots of Aussie slang.

Mix a new squeeze with an old flame and you risk creating a lethal cocktail.

'Specially if it's *your* new squeeze. And *his* old flame.

And 'specially if the bitch has bad habits.

Like showing up when it's least convenient.

Like when you're sharing Death by Chocolate, warming up for the *real* dessert.

Like dying in your house—and bleeding all over your recently steam-cleaned white shag-pile.

Take Joylene, my partner's ex-significant other. Almost everyone calls her Joy, and I use the term loosely.

V-e-e-e-e-ry loosely.

She's a Botoxed blonde with big hair and an even bigger attitude. The sort who eats men for breakfast. Preferably with lashings of tomato sauce and a plate of fries on the side.

Tasty? Maybe.

Once.

Tasteful? Oh yeah, a real class act: lower class.

Before the split, Joy worked for Nino, my hair stylist, doing manicures in a haze of acetone at the front of his salon.

Nino, despite his faux-European accent, loved taking the mick. And Joy, with her well-developed internal focus, was easy bait.

"Don't you go lighting no cigarettes, Joy-lene." Nino always used her full name. Real loud. He knew she hated it. *"Else you'll blow this place sky high."*

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Nino had a point. All those solvent-based nail treatments. Those acetone-soaked wads choking the bin. And Lord only knows how much lacquer supporting that enormous swelling of hair.

Joy's reaction—a one-finger salute and a tart smile that was pure Starlet Frosted Ice—was conveniently reflected in the mirror at Nino's work station.

He was giving me the once-over with a blow-dryer. I was pulling out all the stops to make a big impression at a job interview that afternoon.

Ed Gillespie, chief-of-staff on the daily rag where I'd cut my teeth as a journo, was scouting for a new crime reporter. And after two years on the women's-interest pages, I was baying for blood.

This is all history now, but I remember the incident clearly. Partly because it was later the same week that Joy scarpered with one of Nino's talented young apprentices, an accessory barely half her age. The same day I heard I'd got the job I'd coveted for longer than I cared to remember.

Nino was a mess when I turned up that afternoon with a magnum of brut to thank him for the blow-job. Hair all over the floor. He was usually such a stickler for cleanliness.

"It's that Joy-leeeen!" He screamed the name when I forced him to open the solid brass security door and let me in. *"She's had her sights on Troy for weeks! Been making eyes at him in my mirrors!"* He ripped a scented tissue from the box I offered and dabbed his eyes. *"Now I'll have to train up someone else for next month's State Crowning Glory Championships."*

Ever the pragmatist, I cracked open the champers, found two coffee mugs in the staff kitchen, and helped Nino get blind.

Which is how I came to have a jackhammer in my head on my first morning in crime.

"Gottacaseforyadowntown." Ed Gillespie doesn't talk—he aims and fires. Like a machine gun. He thrust a piece of paper with an address into my hand.

"Somepoofterhairdresserlookslikehetoppedhimself."

It's not the best way to hear that one of your principle confidants is dead.

I guess my pallor may have deepened a shade, because I felt Gillespie's miss-nothing grey eyes crawling all over my face. Wondering what'd possessed him to hire a Goth, maybe.

"Cops'reontheirwaynowsogetyourprettyassdownthereseewhatfactsyoucanfind."

Did I have the stomach for it? You bet. A misspent youth watching old gangster movies wasn't a total waste.

I swallowed a couple of Panadeine and hit Nino's salon in record time.

The place was already crawling with cops.

A big slab of beefcake in a tailored suit was up back near the

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wash basins, sharing a joke with a swarm of uniformed officers. And a guy in a blue boiler suit was showing a lot of interest in the empty magnum Nino and I had shared the previous day.

I grabbed a uniform as he pushed past with a bin liner. "Who's your chief?"

"Lou Pirelli." He indicated towards the suit up back.

I did a mental shuffle of the files I'd memorised for the interview with Gillespie. *"Flash" Lou Pirelli. New Homicide chief. Ex-Drugs Squad. 190cm. 95kg. Drives a red Mercedes sports—very, very fast.*

Mama did warn me about fast men. So my alarm bells would've been ringing even if the Armani-clad lump of muscle hadn't been carrying on as though he was at a joke fest. And poor Nino barely cold.

If he'd been up-front I might've blamed the solvent haze still clouding the atmosphere around the manicure table.

My mouth hardened as I relaxed my grip on the uniform. "Thanks."

I sashayed towards the circle of jokers. The group fell silent. Works every time.

"Hi, boys," I breathed, and offered Pirelli my press pass.

He glanced at the plastic without looking at me, then read my name aloud. "Sig-our-ney Dunlop."

There was a ripple of laughter as the jerk deliberately mangled my French Christian name.

"Sigourney," I corrected. "Rhymes with horny."

I saw the guy's nostrils flare—just enough for me to pitch my question.

"What's the theory here, boys? Accident? Murder?"

"Suicide," Pirelli said, regaining his bonhomie. "Electrocuted." He was tinkering with a screwdriver and a Black & Decker Commander with optional "finger dry" attachment.

"Not possible!" I spat.

The beefcake's eyebrows tilted upwards, the bonhomie racked down a notch.

"Hey, I *knew* Nino. Only yesterday we got drunk together." I explained about the magnum.

Pirelli put down the dryer and picked up a big bag of peanuts off the counter. He began cracking shells, tossing peanuts and catching them in his mouth.

Eventually he spoke. It was kind of garbled, due to the nuts. "So you got drunk together?"

"Nino had a couple of . . . personal issues. Nothing serious."

"But serious enough to get seriously drunk . . ."

"Listen, the guy was making plans for next month's State Crowning Glory Championships. He wasn't about to top himself."

Pirelli cracked another load of peanuts. "So, you think it was an accident?"

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"Hardly. Nino was a stickler for safety."

"So what *is* your theory, Dunlop?"

"I think someone else was involved."

Pirelli's good humour flagged momentarily. Those big jaws slammed down hard on the fistful of nuts, then he spoke.

"Why don't you get on and do the job that chip-wrapper employs you to do, and leave the theories to us."

"Sure," I summoned my most professional smile as I retrieved a card from my bag and handed it over. "This is my direct line. I'd appreciate a call if there're any developments."

Then I made a dignified exit. Or tried to. Given the ripple of laughter that tailed me across the salon.

I cornered the guy in the boiler suit as I made my escape. "The monkey always so cheerful on the premises of the recently deceased?"

"Nah." The boiler suit grinned. "He's celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

He lowered his voice. "Wife left yesterday. . . ."

There was another burst of laughter from up back.

Some joke about burning rubber.

I left with one fact.

Of which I was certain.

Pirelli was a pig.

In every sense.

Pirelli and I were married in a civil ceremony ten days after his "decree absolute" from Joylene came through.

Okay, so let me explain. Sure, the guy's humour is maybe a little offbeat. He's addicted to peanuts. And in private he calls me Bunnikins—sheesh! But if you like your beefcake wrapped in Armani, then you have to admit Pirelli is one attractive package.

Besides, from my point of view, the union was one helluva career move.

"WassamattawithyouSigi?" Ed Gillespie wanted to know when I announced I'd be marrying the chief superintendent. *"Most-girlsjustwannamarryf'money."*

Joy had her own booth in a city department store by this stage. I saw her when I travelled up to choose a suspender belt to match my scarlet stilettos for the wedding.

But she didn't acknowledge me. I'm not even sure she remembered me as one of Nino's clients. I blamed the solvents.

Things might have been different had I ever asked her to do my nails.

We spent the honeymoon giving his house a makeover. He wired up the study to accommodate my computer, scanner, and printer, leaving me to repaint the Joylene-inspired kitchen.

Not that I've got anything against cerise.

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Or mauve.

As such.

I also had the job of bundling up "the children"—three apricot French lop rabbits—and dispatching them by courier to Joy's new address.

I'd barely started scraping the walls for the paint job when the first nuisance call came. There was a strangely empty silence when I picked up the receiver.

Several times after that I let the phone ring out and ran a *10# trace. It matched the contact details the lawyer had given us with the instructions for dispatching the rabbits.

A few weeks later a call came one night when Lou was out on a case. This time the caller spoke.

"Is . . ." There was the barest hint of hesitation. "Lou-ise there?"

"No one of that name here, honey."

"I must've dialled the wrong number," the caller's voice oozed. "I'll try again."

But she didn't attempt to hang up. So I purred back, "You do that—*Joy-lene!*"

There was an audible gasp before the line went dead.

The calls stopped for a while after that, until the night of Lou's next birthday. We'd planned an intimate dinner at home.

He'd turned and nibbled my left earlobe as he left for work that morning. "Don't wear yourself out," he warned. "Just you on a plate'll be fine."

It was my regular day off, so I went uptown and bought him a Versace black silk shirt, then treated him to some matching satin lingerie for me.

Afterwards, I chose the night's meal from a gourmet food hall. Smoked salmon, avocado, a little Thai stir-fry with noodles, and two portions of Death by Chocolate. Oh, and a big bag of roasted peanuts.

Lou'd saved his dessert for later, and was sharing my slice with me on the couch. His right hand was spoon-feeding mocha mousse while his left traced warm circles of pleasure on my inner thighs.

My appetite for chocolate was fading fast when the phone rang.

My thigh muscles slammed tight on his paw. "Let it ring."

He tried to pull away. "But it could be work, Bunnikins."

Those adductors locked on. "Let . . . it . . . .ring!"

"*Your* work, Bunnikins?"

I was off that couch and on the phone quicker'n you can say "deadline."

"Hello?"

"Put Lou on." There was no attempt to disguise the toffee-brittle voice this time.

"Flash's . . . occupied," I giggled. It was true. He'd begun massaging my shoulders with the hot, hard balls of his fingers.

"Just put him on, 'Lop, I'm freezin' my arse off here."

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"It's hairself," I said, and held out the receiver.

He snatched it. "Joy?"

After that Lou did a lot of listening. "You're what? . . . . . But I don't think . . . . . All right . . . . . all *right,* gimme forty minutes, okay?" He slammed down the receiver.

And then, to my amazement, he reached for the Merc keys.

"Where're you going?"

"Neverforgettoaskthebleedingobvious Sigi." Gillespie's words buzzed in my ears.

Lou held out his arms in appeal. "She's got a flat," he said.

"You're not going to fix it!"

I could feel myself heating up again, for all the wrong reasons.

"What about her handbag?" I wanted to know.

"Huh?"

There are few things more irritating than a man who fails to see a big lump of irony when it smacks him in the face.

"Troy? Joy's toy boy?" It galled me to have to spell it out.

But not as much as the response.

"Aw, Bunnikins." I caught a stab of sympathy in those Latin eyes. "The kid didn't last more'n a few weeks."

He stooped and gave me a perfunctory kiss on the cheek before shrugging his big shoulders into his jacket and stashing the bag of peanuts under one arm.

As soon as the Merc was clear of the drive, I did the sensible thing. I went straight to the refrigerator and, bit by bit, consumed Lou's portion of Death by Chocolate.

There was a perceptible weakening in the *frisson* between Lou and me after that. For starters, I threw out the black satin in favour of a six-pack of Bonds cottontails.

Shortly afterwards, he e-mailed me from the station. The message was elegant in its conciseness. "Rabbits arriving tonight."

My cue to head straight to Kmart and buy two new nightgowns.

In passion-killer flannelette.

So what if Lou was always telling me to curb my spending? Our bank balance ran on empty thanks to *his* extravagance.

When I got back, I consigned the message to the Deleted Items basket.

While I was at it, I decided to permanently delete some of the messages that Lou and I accumulated because we often work from home.

I wasn't prepared for what I was about to find.

"Pay by Saterday or The Lop gets it!"

The e-mail address was a nail-fashion business in one of the city arcades. Not that I needed it. That spelling was a dead giveaway.

And with a name like Sigourney 'Bunnikins' Dun-*lop,* I had every right to feel twitchy. Should I be bracing myself for a bullet—or a scoop?

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Whenever Mama was stressed she'd clean the house.

Which probably explains why I found myself wielding an armload of anti-stat cloths that afternoon, moving faster than any hostess before an Enjo party.

By the time I'd swiped the floors, wiped the bench tops, and polished the wall oven, my enthusiasm was flagging.

So when I reached Lou's collection of old home-recorded videos I collapsed on the shagpile to read the labels.

Like I said, I was raised on a diet of B-grade movies. Low-budget thrillers mainly, with a few spaghetti Westerns on the side.

But I'd never touched Lou's collection before.

I ran my eye down the badly spelled titles scrawled in Joy's handwriting—*An Afair to Remember, Star Treck, Revenge of the Killer Tomartoes.* I smiled, imagining Joy demolishing a megapack of popcorn, glued to this classic.

Curiosity made me open the box.

But inside there was no tape.

Just a lock-top plastic bag containing enough amphetamines to keep the local high school high for a month.

I reinserted the bag and slammed the box shut.

Just in time.

Moments later, I heard the Merc turn in.

I quickly shoved the box back in place.

By the time Lou walked in, I was Enjo-ing dust off the TV screen.

He walked over and brushed the hair away from my eyes. Since Nino, I haven't been able to find a decent stylist.

"You okay?" he said.

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"That pugnacious tilt of your chin is a dead giveaway, Bunnikins."

He'd been like this ever since doing an in-service course on body language.

He went on. "Get my message?"

"Yes."

"You don't mind having the girls, do you? Joy's got a nail conference." He was already heading back out the door.

He reappeared carrying a bag of rabbit muesli.

"How long will she be gone?" I heard myself ask. I was trying to calculate what kind of injury a 50kg woman could inflict on a 95kg man with a 30kg bag of rabbit muesli.

"Week, maybe." He slung the muesli in the corner. I felt my blood fizz as a small cloud of mixed grain settled on recently swiped ceramic. "What's for dinner?"

"Whatever you're cooking," I replied. "Rabbit sounds good."

I noticed his shoulders stiffen—and I hadn't even done the body-language course.

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Despite his appetite for fine wine and good food, Lou's no gourmet chef.

So it shouldn't have surprised me to sit down to a plate of peanut butter sandwiches followed by peanut-brittle ice cream and coffee with—you guessed it—chocolate-coated peanuts.

"You genuinely like peanuts, don't you?" I pushed the ice cream aside and reached for a toothpick.

"Sure." He wolfed down the half sandwich I'd left on my plate. "That's one of the things I like about you, Bunnikins."

I braced myself.

"Joy would never let me eat peanuts. She didn't like cleaning up the shells."

He drained his coffee and disappeared into our home office.

"Will you be long, Flash?" I'd promised Gillespie a look at a first cut of a story I was working on by morning.

"About an hour. That okay?"

"Fine," I said, and flicked the taps to treat myself to a long, hot bath.

I was working on Ed's draft when the phone call came.

Lou was in bed. I heard the sleep in his voice evaporate.

"When?"

He poked his head around the door. "You decent?"

Happily I was. A vision in crisp new flannelette.

"That was a tip-off. We're about to be raided."

No sooner were the words out than there was a rap on the front door. A flashlight flickered outside the office window.

I had to move. Fast!

Lou appeared too stunned to budge as I pushed past him.

I was still breathless when the Tactical Response Group burst through the laundry door.

"Hey, no need for that, guys," Lou pleaded. "We were just coming."

One of the wits in the pack glanced at my flushed complexion and heaving chest and nodded. "Yeah, we can see that."

A trio of German shepherds came out of nowhere to fill the room. They strained at their leads, yelping like crazy.

The noise reverberated around the turquoise and flame walls in the open living area I'd yet to paint.

But it was nothing to the din when those hairy monsters hit the shag-pile.

I grabbed a poker from the fire surround, preparing to beat off the dogs. "Get the dogs away from the rabbits!"

The handlers took one look and knew I meant business. The "girls" were quivering up the back of their hutch, just out of reach of the inquisitive noses sniffing their safe house.

"Okay, lady." The TRG chief gave the order and the dog team disappeared into the living area.

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Lou's praise was memorable.

"Hell, Bunnikins." He was looking at the rabbits. "I didn't know you cared."

He went to open the door of the hutch, but I stopped him.

"Not now!" I hissed. "Make sure these turkeys don't destroy the rest of this place."

The raid was thorough.

And fruitless.

It was an hour before we had the place to ourselves.

As the yelping from the dog van grew fainter in the distance, I turned to Lou.

"About the 'Lop."

Lou shrugged. "I don't know what you mean."

"I'll show you."

I walked over to the hutch and opened the door. Then I reached inside the box where the girls were still quivering, and shoved my hand into the straw litter.

Lou stilled as I extracted the secreted video case and displayed the contents.

"Where'd you find that?" His voice was cop-mode flat.

"Where *you* hid it."

"I didn't hide it." His denial was so spontaneous, I almost believed him.

"Then who did?"

Lou didn't speak for several moments.

"Joy had some bad habits. She must've left those behind."

He dragged his hand through his hair and headed for bed.

Case closed.

It was late. But Ed was still expecting my story. And I had some Internet research to finish.

I headed for the kitchen. The excitement had given me an appetite. I hadn't exactly overeaten at dinner.

Thanks to the dog team, the kitchen looked like a war zone. I retrieved a peanut-butter-smeared knife from the table, loaded it with margarine, and spread two slices of Hi-Fibre white.

I found a packet of ham in back of the fridge, checked the use-by date, peeled off a slice, and laid it on top. I grabbed a fistful of leaves from a ready-made salad pack, squirted mayo over the result, and clamped the bread over.

Then I cut it into four triangles and poured myself a glass of milk.

It was ten-thirty when I went back into the home office to finish the draft. But my mind was too stirred up to work.

I downed three of the sandwiches and the milk, took the leftovers back to the wreck of a kitchen, and settled back at the computer at eleven P.M.

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Next morning was Sunday. Sunlight was already streaming through the gap in the bedroom curtains when I woke up.

I did a slow roll and felt for Lou. His space in the bed next to me was cold.

So was the scene in the deserted kitchen when I hit the deck to heat water for coffee. No sign of Lou. And no note explaining where he'd gone, either.

My leftover sandwich had disappeared, but that was the only tidying he'd done. So as soon as I'd downed the coffee, I started clearing up.

I'd just pushed the "heavy cycle" button on the dishwasher when there was a knock at the door.

"You gonna let me in, pagan?"

I recognised the holler as belonging to Maggie Tate, witch and longtime friend.

I pulled open the door to see her holding a big bunch of red roses in one hand and a bag of croissants in the other.

Maggie's been writing horoscopes for our daily since I was a cadet reporter.

"Make it up!" I remember her hoot of laughter when I questioned her sources. "But of course!"

We've been friends ever since.

Lou calls Maggie "a character." He loathes her.

Maybe because she drives a two-ton truck and works an occult tent at agricultural shows around the country to supplement her income.

Maybe because there's a sign on the side of her truck saying: *Caution: Witch on Wheels.*

Or maybe because she's my one true friend.

Which is why it didn't really surprise me to see Maggie, replete with gifts for soothing a battered soul.

"I heard about the raid." She shoved the croissants into my arms and scanned the dishevelled house. "Where's The Incredible Bulk?"

Did I mention that Maggie doesn't like Lou, either?

"He's out." I reached for the roses. "These're gorgeous. I'll put them in water."

Maggie hung on. "You start the food. Let me do this." She was already moving away in her not entirely sensible shoes towards the laundry. "Make mine decaf. Black."

I'd just loaded the oven with croissants when I heard the sound of cut-glass impacting on ceramic.

Then silence.

"You okay, Mags?"

There was no answer, so I went to investigate.

We met halfway.

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Maggie delivered the news with her usual measure of understatement.

"How long you had a dead woman on your carpet?"

I don't know how long we stayed staring at the body slumped across the white shagpile.

One stiffened hand was still clutched to her shoulder bag.

And one of my best bread-and-butter plates lay smashed on the hearth where she'd apparently also hit her hair.

Despite the disarray, there was no mistaking that coif.

"It's Joy."

Maggie groaned. "Oh. Joy."

She'd grabbed her mobile by this stage. I could see she was poised to dial triple 0.

"Wait." I had to think fast. "I should let Lou know."

"Something tells me he already knows, pagan."

She punched in a zero.

I snatched the phone.

"Just give me a couple of minutes, okay?"

Maggie relented. She slipped the mobile back in its holster.

"Okay, pagan." She rolled her kohl-rimmed eyes. "What d'you want me to do?"

I grabbed a pair of latex gloves from the laundry. "Help me put these on."

Slowly, I reached forward and looped the strap of Joy's shoulder bag off her arm. Her hair jerked violently as it came free.

I tipped the contents onto the carpet—lipstick, nail varnish, condoms, wallet, one silver key on a chain, a bunch of keys on a plastic finger key ring.

I picked up the silver key and walked to our front door.

The lock gave no resistance when I tested it.

So chances were she'd let herself in. Just as I suspected she'd let herself in earlier to plant those drugs in the cassette box.

But why try to set up Lou?

I knew from my Internet research that he'd been making regular payments out of our bank account. He'd told me it was going into a high-interest Dreamsaver. And I'd been so pleased at his initiative that I hadn't bothered to check.

But last night I'd discovered he'd been paying money to Joy.

It could only mean one thing.

Blackmail.

The key felt cold in my hand as I walked back to Maggie and returned it to its place inside Joy's shoulder bag.

"You look preoccupied, pagan."

"I'm thinking," I said.

I picked up the bunch of keys and carefully looked through them.

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At last I held up an aged brass key and smiled.

"You're my witness to this, Mags."

"Where we going?"

"Nino's."

"If you're looking for a wash and trim, you're too late."

I was already grabbing my jacket. I hoped I sounded reassuring. "I need your truck."

Nino's Hair Salon was now "Dreadlocks." But apart from the name, little had changed.

Being Sunday, the place was empty. I got Maggie to pull the truck up right outside the door. Then, under cover of *Caution: Witch on Wheels,* I tried the key.

After a few seconds I felt the lock give. I didn't risk pushing open the door, for fear of setting off the security alarm. I relocked it and headed for the passenger seat.

"Where to now?" Maggie gave a wry smile. "Fancy taking in a movie? Maybe a spot of brunch? Or you gonna tell someone official about this stiff—and I don't mean the carpet cleaners, neither."

"Take me to the office. Ed Gillespie always works Sundays."

I grabbed Maggie's mobile and punched in Ed's direct line. I could hear Maggie muttering in the background.

"You're thinkin' of work while your murderer husband runs loose. He's already killed one woman. You sure as hell don't wanna be the second."

"Correction. He's killed one man." Maggie looked puzzled as I finished talking to Ed. "Nino."

"Never!"

I had to grab the steering wheel as Maggie nearly lost control on a roundabout.

"He had the motive—Joy was having an affair with Nino before she took off with Troy."

"No way, pagan. Nino couldn't stand that broad."

"Believe it. The arguments were just a cover."

How many passes from Nino had I fielded for the sake of a wash-and-wear layer cut?

"Lou had the opportunity. Joy had a key to Nino's salon, remember. It would've been simple enough for him to get a spare one cut. And he's a whiz with electrical gear—they don't call him 'Flash' just because he drives fast."

Maggie was hanging on to the steering wheel as though her life depended on it.

Her brow furrowed. "So, explain the new piece of furniture parked in your lounge."

Ed was waiting for us when we reached the office. He pulled a half bottle of malt from one pocket of his jacket, two glasses from another. Then he poured.

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"Drinkthisforchrissakes." He pushed one glass into my hand, the other he pressed at Maggie: *"Cops'vepickedupPirelliandthey'reontheirwaytoyourplacenow."*

"You tell them they need to run the toxicology tests?"

"Justlikeyouaskedbabe." He winked. *"Let'sgo."*

The cops had Lou in cuffs by the time we arrived.

"Hey, Bunnikins." He held up his manacled hands. "Just like you always wanted, hey!"

The joke fell a little flat, sharing the room as we were with a corpse. And half of Homicide.

My lack of response brought out Lou's desperate side.

"Joy was blackmailing me about an . . . er . . . indiscretion." A pulse throbbed at his temple. "She threatened to give you the biggest story of your life if I stopped paying up. . . .When I tried, she set up the drugs and the tip-off."

I was only half listening.

A hot scoop—right under my nose—and I'd missed it! Damn!

I tuned back just in time to catch Lou's impassioned plea.

"But I didn't kill her, Bunnikins. Honest. You gotta believe me."

I tossed him a chocolate-coated peanut.

"Maybe you didn't *mean* to kill Joy." I strode to the home office and retrieved my research. "I think the toxicology tests will show Joy died of anaphylactic shock."

No one spoke, so I went on.

"She had a severe and acute allergic reaction to peanuts. Isn't that the *real* reason she never let you have peanuts in the same house?"

Lou squirmed.

"Last night I left the remains of a ham-and-salad sandwich in the kitchen, a sandwich made using the same knife you used to make peanut-butter sandwiches earlier in the evening. My theory is that Joy ate that sandwich while she was here checking on her precious lops, with fatal consequences."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Maggie shake her head.

"Sure adds new meaning to the term toxic shock," she muttered.

Lou got seven years. With good behaviour, he could be out in three.

I got the year's top award for crime reporting.

And Ed Gillespie got promoted to editor-in-chief.

"YougonnawaitforthebastardSigi?" That's what I admire about Gillespie. Never too proud to ask the obvious.

"Seven years is a l-o-o-o-ng time," I croon in reply.

A familiar spark burns in the grey eyes that regard me from beneath those editorial eyebrows.

It ignites as I slam home the lock on his office door.

And sashay towards his generously proportioned executive desk.

"Now, Ed," I purr. "About my raise." ●

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The German Cologne Mystery

by Josh Pachter and Jon L. Breen

An hour before a dark Manhattan midnight, Inspector Wretched Breen broke down the unlocked door of the fast-declining Hotel Madrid's room 521. He came in response to a phone call from his son, celebrated mystery writer and accomplished amateur detective Celery Breen.

"Got your message, Cel," the birdlike inspector chirped, "and flew right over. Where's the deceased?"

Celery pointed. On the floor, behind the neatly-made double bed, the body of a small, dark-complected Latin type with a pencil-thin moustache and a receding hairline lay sprawled in a kidney-shaped pool of blood.

The inspector recognized the dapper victim at once. "Carlos Nacionale." The name erupted from between Breen's thin lips like a cough.

"You know him, Dad?"

"Oh, I know him. Cuban refugee, came over with the Marielitos in '80. They say he scratched out a living as an errand boy for one of the mobs in Miami for a while before he came to New York and got into the numbers racket here. Florida cops never did pin anything on him, though, and neither could we. Not for want of trying, I'll say that." The inspector washed a wiry hand across his chin. "He lived with a daughter, if I remember correctly."

With a nod, Celery indicated the raven-haired beauty sitting on the sofa across the room. The woman's attention was focused on her father's corpse; she seemed oblivious to the by-play between Breen *père* and Breen *fils*.

"My condolences, miss," said the inspector, and she regarded him sadly for a moment with teary eyes. Then she turned away again, and Celery crisply began to outline the facts.

Half an hour earlier, on her return from a dinner date with a girlfriend, Velvet Nacionale had let herself into the suite of rooms she shared with her father to discover his body dead on the floor. She had screamed, of course. By the purest chance, Celery had at that moment been playing cards with several acquaintances in a

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room down the hall from 521, and Velvet's shriek had brought him running.

Taking in the scene with a glance, Celery had immediately called Sentry Street to summon Inspector Breen and the boys from Homicide. While awaiting their arrival, he had examined the body, with two unexpected results: First, he had gotten his hands and trousers unpleasantly sticky, and second, he had discovered a pair of ordinary dice clutched firmly between the dead man's right thumb and forefinger. Held with a single black dot visible on the exposed face of each die, the two small cubes resembled nothing so much as a pair of eyes staring blindly at the ceiling.

"A strange one, son," observed Inspector Breen. "But with that mysterious dying message and all, it's right up your alley, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is, Dad, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave it in your capable hands for the time being. I've got another appointment in a couple of minutes, and I don't want to be late for it. If I miss you at breakfast, I'll come down to Sentry Street as soon as I can, all right?" Pausing at the door on his way out of the room, Celery added casually, "By the way, Dad, Carlos Nacionale was poisoned."

"Poisoned?" the wiry old inspector protested. "But, Cel, what about all this blood?"

It was too late for an answer. The younger Breen was already gone. The inspector was surprised to see his son leave the scene of a bizarre murder so abruptly.

But he knew from experience that Celery would come through in the crunch.

As promised, the gifted sleuth strolled into his father's office early the following morning, his face bandaged from one of his chronic shaving cuts but otherwise looking fresher than he had the night before.

Velvet Nacionale was already there, and she rushed up to Celery with her sad black eyes wide. "Have you learned anything, Mr. Breen?" she urged, her voice low and pleading.

"I've just been talking with Doc Probably," Celery told her. "He's our medical examiner here in the city, and he's just completed an autopsy on your father."

"And was he—?"

"Dead? Yes, certainly."

"I mean, was he poisoned, like you said last night?"

"Oh. Oh yes. I'm afraid he was."

"By what?" asked the inspector.

"I don't know."

"Probably didn't tell you?"

"Probably doesn't think he was poisoned at all. He thinks Nacionale's throat was slit, the irascible old quack. But all the classic symptoms of poisoning are there."

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"What symptoms?" Inspector Breen demanded.

"He's dead, isn't he? No heartbeat, no pulse, no nothing. He was poisoned, Dad. Q.E.D."

"C.O.D.?" Velvet wondered.

"Never mind that," said the inspector. "What about the stab wound on his neck?"

Celery fingered the bandage on his own throat reflectively and murmured, "Cut himself shaving, Dad. Happens to the best of us."

"Do you have any idea what those dice he was holding are supposed to mean?" Velvet Nacionale breathed eagerly.

"That's the key point of this entire case, Ms. Nacionale," Celery congratulated her. "Obviously your father wanted to leave behind a message of some sort, perhaps a clue to the identity of his killer. There were no writing materials in the room, so he had to use the only thing available to him at the time: that pair of dice. Once I can figure out what he meant by holding them as he did, I'll know who killed him. But so far, I'm stumped."

The telephone trilled, and Inspector Breen scooped up the receiver. He listened intently for several minutes, then scowled and shouted a series of instructions in a birdlike bark before hanging up.

"What was that all about, Dad?"

"Bank robbery late last night," the inspector frowned, "over on Lexington. They think they've got the guy who pulled the job downstairs, but they can't get anything out of him. Forget about that, though, Cel, and tell me what you've got on those dratted dice."

Celery shook his head. "It's a dead end, Dad. I've wracked my brain, but I can't come up with a connection that makes any sense. I've considered every possibility, but it's just no good. Two dots held side by side—it doesn't add up. Unless . . ."

"Unless what, son?"

"Unless Nacionale wasn't holding them side by side, after all," Celery said slowly.

"Cel, I don't—"

"Dad, that's it! I've been a blundering, incompetent nincompoop not to have seen it sooner! I don't know how I can have been so utterly, insufferably stupid! My failure to grasp such a simple point rivals the great intellectual disasters of human history. Not even the shortsighted fools who assured Columbus that the world was flat were as hopelessly, fatuously misguided as—"

"Celery!" the inspector intervened. He had to: During one recent case, he had sat through half an hour's worth of his only offspring's self-flagellation to discover at the end of the tirade that Celery in his fury had completely forgotten the sudden insight that had set it off in the first place. Now, two months later, that case was still in the open file. "Put a cork in it and tell me what the heck you're talking about!"

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"Yes, of course. Thanks, Dad. But you see, it's so elementary! In fact, it's even simpler than elementary. It's positively preschool. Why, the very idea that I can have taken so long to—"

"Celery!"

"What? Oh yes, Dad. Nacionale was trying to get across two dots, all right. But not side-by-side dots. The message he intended us to see was two dots, one on top of the other!"

"Yes, Mr. Breen, go on," Velvet whispered.

"No time for that now," exclaimed Celery. "You wait here, Velvet. Let's go, Dad. I only hope we're not already too late!"

Celery swung open the mirrored door and rummaged through the medicine cabinet impatiently. "Aspirin . . . mouthwash . . . toothpaste . . . ah, here it is!"

He held aloft an ornate cut-glass bottle and waved it triumphantly.

"What is it, son?"

"Dad, Dad, Dad! Don't you see it yet? It's all so wonderfully simple. Two dots. One on top of the other. What does that mean to you?"

"Gosh, Cel, I don't—"

"Punctuation, pater! Simple punctuation!"

"I don't understand."

"It's a colon, Dad, just a silly little colon!"

"So what?" the inspector muttered darkly.

"I'll show you so what, you lovable old ignoramus," Celery said affectionately. "Look, what is it I'm holding here?"

"A bottle of fancy aftershave. Like I said, so what?"

"It's not aftershave, Dad. It's cologne. Expensive cologne."

"It's no good, Cel. I still don't get it."

Celery slapped his forehead impatiently. "But it's all so obvious, Dad. Nacionale, poisoned, dying, wanted to tell us where to locate the deadly stuff that was doing him in. If he'd had a pen or a pencil he could have written 'in the cologne.' But he didn't. All he had at hand was those dice. So he made a crude representation of a colon, hoping someone would draw the connection between colon and cologne. It was a gamble, but it paid off."

"Son, are you trying to tell me Carlos Nacionale drank a bottle of aftershave lotion?"

"Of course not," the younger Breen said indulgently. "Nacionale was in the bathroom shaving. He cut himself, which explains the blood we saw. Then, when he was finished, he splashed cologne on his face. Either the stuff contained some sort of contact poison, or else it was the noxious fumes that killed him. Either way, it didn't finish him off until he'd had time to set up that message with the dice."

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"I don't know, Cel. I mean, it doesn't even say 'cologne' on the bottle. . . ."

"Doesn't it, Dad? Look at the label. 'Made in Germany,' it says. Once you check it out, I'm betting you'll find that this Borgian brew was cooked up in Köln—or, to give it its Americanized name, Cologne—in western Germany, and that whoever gave it to Carlos Nacionale was his killer."

But the following morning at breakfast, a dejected Wretched Breen was wondering if the vaunted Celery had at last begun to go to seed. Following a call from headquarters to the Breen apartment, he told his son softly, "About that aftershave lotion of yours . . ."

"The cologne? What about it? From Köln, right?"

"Aftershave, Cel. From Frankfurt."

"Well, it's a good thing Carlos Nacionale didn't realize that. He might not have left us any message at all. Did you find out who gave it to him?"

The inspector sipped coffee and sighed. "Yeah. Velvet picked it up for him, a couple of weeks ago."

"Velvet? That's quite a blow, Dad," Celery said solemnly. "I liked that young woman. I even hoped that, someday, perhaps, maybe . . . Ah well, that's all part of the detective game, I suppose. It's happened before, and no doubt it'll happen again, as long as sleuths are born with hearts. And Celery Breen, whatever his detractors may say of him, does have a heart. Yes, well, I'll muddle through somehow, I expect. Don't try to console me. I'll be all right. Have you got the murderous little minx in custody?"

"Celery. Son. Carlos Nacionale's aftershave was not—repeat, not—poisoned."

"It wasn't? But how else could the fatal toxin have been administered?"

"Think back, Cel. Remember all that blood around the body?"

"Yes? What of it?"

"Nacionale was stabbed, son. His throat was slit wide open."

"That was a lousy shaving cut, Dad!"

"Probably—"

"No, definitely!"

"I meant Doc Probably. He—"

"He has a steady hand with a postmortem knife, but no imagination, Dad."

"Son, listen, I know you're no garden-variety sleuth. But even you are bound to be wrong sometimes, and I'm afraid that this is one of those times."

Celery stalked furiously out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Moments later, though, the door swung back open to re-admit him. "Okay," he said, "then who killed Nacionale? Tell me that."

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"I don't know who killed him, son. Not yet. I'm going down to headquarters. Want to come along?"

"No! The answer's in those dice, Dad, and I'm not leaving this room until I figure it out."

"Okay, son, you sit here and vegetate if you want to," said the birdlike inspector, "but I'll just keep pecking away until I come up with the truth."

And, his feathers ruffled, he hopped out the door.

Celery pounded his forehead to stimulate thought. He thought of the dismal failures of his salad days, of the brilliant successes of his recent past, and, most of all, of the body, the blood, and the dice, the dice, the dice. . . .

The phone was ringing when Wretched Breen let himself into his office. "Yeah? . . . Oh jeez, I forgot all about him. Is he still down there? . . . Yeah, bring him on up."

Moments later, a two-headed shadow appeared at the frosted glass door to Inspector Breen's office. The door swung open to reveal the beefy frame of Sergeant Thomas Veal, handcuffed at the wrist to a nervous little man with beady, reptilian eyes.

"Mr. Luigi Calamare," the sergeant announced.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't my old friend Luigi the Snake," the inspector greeted them. "Shoo him in, Thomas, and help him find a chair."

"What's the big idea, Inspectuh?" the little man hissed. "I been here all night, this lunk won't let me call my lawyuh, and I din' even do nothin'."

"We hear otherwise," the old inspector snapped. "We got a tip you knocked over the Second National Bank on Lexington the night before last, sometime around midnight."

"That's a lie! I wasn't nowheres near no bank that night.. I was playin' pokuh ovuh on Nint' Avenoo with some of the boys. You can ast them, they'll tell yuh."

"Sure they will, Luigi. They always do, don't they?"

"It's the troot, Inspectuh, I swear it. Hell, you can ast your kid if yuh don't believe me!"

"Celery? Was he there?"

"Yeah, sure, up to the time that dame started screamin', anyways. He dropped a bundle, too. That kid's no card-playuh, Inspectuh."

Wretched Breen lifted himself from his chair and began to pace the floor, thoughtfully stroking the day-old stubble on his chin. Silence reigned.

"Where was it you were playing?" he asked at last.

"The Hotel Madrid. Room 530."

"And what time did you get there?"

"Eight-thirty, maybe nine uh'clock. I don' remembuh exackly."

"Do you remember what time you left?"

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"Afta one, Inspectuh. I swear to you I—"

"Did you leave the game at all during the course of the evening?"

"Just once, to grab a fresh pack uh cigarettes. It's the troot, Inspectuh. Just ast the boys, they'll back me up."

"How long were you out of the room when you went for cigarettes?"

"A coupla minutes—ten, maybe, fifteen tops. I couldn'a got all the way ovuh to Lexington, if that's what yuh thinkin'."

"You certainly couldn't have." The inspector scowled. "But you could have gotten somewhere closer to hand. Take him back downstairs and book him, Thomas."

"For robbery?" Veal frowned. "But you just said—"

"Not for robbery. For murder."

When the inspector broke down the unlocked door to his son's bedroom an hour later, he found Celery still lost in reverie.

"I have to talk to you, son."

"The dice, Dad. The dice. . . ."

"It's all over, Cel. The Nacionale case is closed. We've got the killer."

"You do? Who was it?"

"Luigi Calamare."

"Luigi? But that's impossible! I was with him when Nacionale was killed."

"No, you weren't. Calamare left your card game to get a pack of cigarettes, remember? At least, that's where he said he was going. But actually he had an unopened pack in his pocket all the time, and when he left Room 530 he simply ducked down the hall to 521, slit Nacionale's throat, and then returned to the game."

"But why, Dad? It doesn't make sense!"

"Nacionale had evidence of Calamare's involvement in the rackets, evidence that would have sent your pal Luigi to prison for a long, long time if we'd gotten a look at it."

"Luigi was a gangster?" said Celery incredulously.

"I'm afraid so, son. And Carlos Nacionale was blackmailing him. But Calamare wanted out from under, so he set up a meeting with Nacionale for the night before last, arranged a poker game as an alibi—with you as an unimpeachable witness—then killed Nacionale and stole back the incriminating evidence."

"And the dice, then? You mean they had nothing to do with it, after all?"

"They had everything to do with it, Cel. Two dice, each with a single spot showing, right? Well, son, thanks to those beady little eyes of his, Luigi Calamare has a cute nickname among his underworld pals. Snake Eyes, they call him, and that's what Carlos Nacionale was trying to tell us when he died: Snake Eyes killed him."

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"You're sure about all this?"

"Positive. When I told Calamare about Nacionale's dying message, he spilled the whole story."

"Well, congratulations, Dad," Celery said with ill-concealed disappointment. "You solved the case without a bit of help from me. From now on, I guess you'll have to take old Celery's advice with a grain of salt, eh?"

The inspector hesitated for a moment, then licked his lips and went on. "Calamare told us something else, son. He said you lost an awful lot of money in that card game the other night, but that you paid it all back bright and early the next morning."

"That—that's right," Celery said nervously.

"Yeah. Well, I hate to ask you this, Cel, but after you left the Hotel Madrid night before last for that 'other appointment' of yours, you didn't happen to go anywhere near the Second National Bank on Lexington, did you?"

"I—I—"

Inspector Wretched Breen shook his head sadly. "I thought you had more moral fiber than that, Celery."

"But, Dad, they said they'd cream me if I didn't pay what I owed them!"

"Well, you're in the soup now, son, I can tell you that."

And, as if someone had propped him upright in a glass of red ink, Celery's face flushed a bright, embarrassed crimson. ●

Ann Kelly's acclaimed novel *Dead On* has been nominated for an Agatha; Gold Circle Films has picked up the movie rights.

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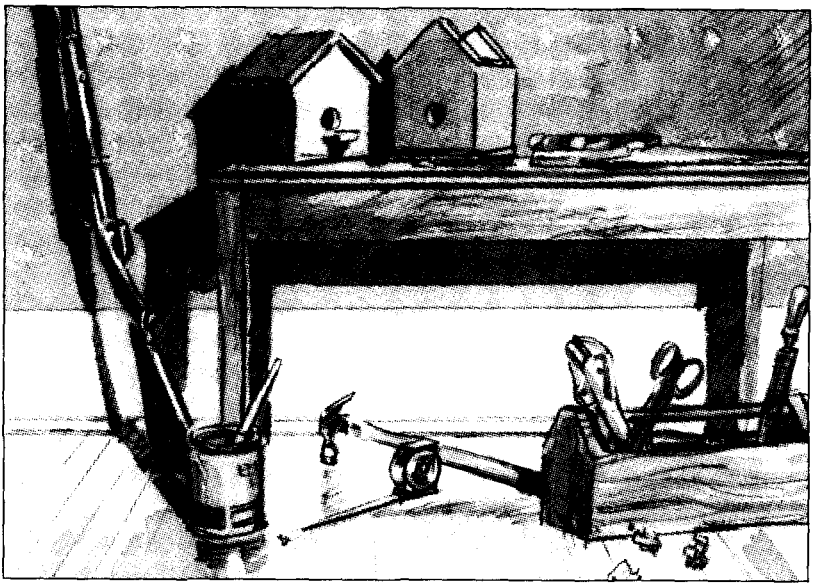

Art by Ron Bucalo

STOLEN

by David Dean

The grey drizzle accompanied him all the way from Frederick, muting the increasingly dramatic landscape of thickly forested mountains and steep ravines; cloaking both the budding signs of spring and his own previously buoyant mood. Desmond had started his trip with the carefree abandon of a schoolboy playing hooky, and even the rigors of negotiating I-95 and the Baltimore Beltway had failed to dampen his spirits. It was only as he entered the foothills of western Maryland and the Alleghenies hove into view that he had felt a slight tightening of his chest—a claustrophobic reaction to the sight of the thin ribbon of highway he drove winding in and out of sight, and finally being swallowed whole by the mist-shrouded mountains.

Desmond cracked his window an inch and plugged a cigarette into his mouth, firing it up with the dash lighter. He inhaled deeply and blew the smoke out in a steady stream that was whisked out the window and tattered to pieces. As he climbed upwards, long tendrils of fog coiled and uncoiled in streamers that undulated down the slopes to the highway, where they, like his cig-

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arette smoke, were torn and scattered by the passage of automobiles. Desmond had the sensation of leaving the solid world and entering one that receded from direct scrutiny, yet would creep up threateningly on the unwatchful. He sighed, yearning now for his journey's end and the welcome mundanity of a chain motel, then flicked his cigarette angrily out the window like a shot across the bow of his uneasiness.

Desmond was not tolerant of dark moods, as his was generally a nature of high spirits, and yes, a dangerous temper when fueled by alcohol. As this was one of his abstemious lulls, he found it especially irksome to be beset by depression, however fleeting. He worked too hard at remaining sober to suffer gladly the black morning-after feeling normally reserved for binges.

Yet he was not an insensitive man, and suspected he understood the true source of his moodiness—in a word, family. Obstensibly, this was a trip to retrieve his nineteen-year-old son from his freshman year of college; in reality, it was an attempt at repair and reconciliation, not only with his boy, but his wife Linda as well. She had pled a heavy work load at the realty company where she was an agent as an excuse for staying back, but Desmond understood that this long, lonely trip was to be his penance.

"My own *via dolorosa,*" he chuckled irreverently, glancing hastily at the passing lane to see if anyone had noticed him talking to himself. But there was no one there, and he began his steep, grateful descent into the narrow valley that the city of Cumberland, and his hotel, lay folded within.

Desmond was surprised, and not a little taken aback, at the gritty, urban quality of Cumberland. He had expected something far more small-town and "countrified," and since he had not made the previous treks to his son's school with Linda, he was unprepared for the jumble of red-brick, turn-of-the-century buildings that lay squeezed into the tight cleft provided by the mountains. The highway was elevated for its passage through the town, and Desmond was allowed an almost aerial view before reaching his exit. A broad, fast-flowing canal ran to his left, while a series of railroad

This new story "deals with themes of justice, redemption, and whether a crime might not serve a greater good in spite of the harm done," says David Dean. "A trip to pick up my son from school in West Virginia inspired it." After years of producing exclusively short stories, David Dean has finally written a novel, which he plans to send out to publishers soon. By day, he's still on the police force in his New Jersey resort town.

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tracks followed the same constricted path to his right, intertwining and dividing several times within the heart of the city. Even as he watched, a freight train crawled smokily into view, the wail of its horn mournful and fraught with warning.

Desmond slowed and turned into his exit, then braked suddenly, several times, as the ramp corkscrewed its way to the city streets, his tires making little barking sounds as they gripped the wet roadway. Fortunately, signs were posted all along his way directing him to the hotel, as there was no line of sight for more than a block that was not obstructed by buildings or the pillars of the overpass. The feeling of claustrophobia that had begun in the foothills now deepened as he parked and retrieved his overnight bag from the car. All around him were three- to six-story buildings with little or no space betwixt them, while mountains crowded up close as if to lean in and watch. Above it all, clouds ran streaming and grey, obscuring and connecting each peak and sealing off the valley beneath like the lid on a kettle. Desmond felt buried.

The hotel was exactly as he expected, and desired—modern and anonymous—and he breathed a little easier in such familiar surroundings. His mood was further buoyed by the clerk retrieving his reservation from the computer without a hitch. He couldn't remember how many times in his business travels he had had to dig through his wallet, or address book, for some torn slip of paper containing his confirmation number, while some somnambulant desk jockey gazed vacantly on. If he were in his drinking mode, he usually gave them an earful on their qualifications, IQ, and possibly their family antecedents; the last depending on how well they took the first two. But that was then, and Desmond was happy to reach his room and find that hot water was in abundance for his shower. He emerged clean, refreshed, and anxious to try the dining room on for size.

The dining area was large and murky; the subdued lighting combining with the gloom of the day outside to give the room a dreamy, underwater quality. Desmond found he was one of only four people there, and the hostess had seated them far apart. He surmised from this that the restaurant had too many servers and too few customers—the hostess was trying to spread the "wealth." Obviously, he thought drily, his server was in no particular hurry to snatch a piece of that limited bounty, as he had been seated for five minutes without so much as a glass of water. He turned his attention to the scene outside the window at his elbow.

Another train (or was it the same he had seen on entering town?) was inching its way along the sprawl of tracks at the rear of the hotel. Even at the walking pace the engineer maintained, Desmond could feel the rumble of its passage through the seat of his spindly chair. He looked back over his shoulder to see if he

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could spot the last car, but the colorful array of brilliant blue and yellow cars extended around a bend and out of sight. They were the only color he had seen in hours. The crack of glass against pressed wood spun him around to find his water waiting for him, along with a teenaged girl with short bleached hair and a jewel in her nostril. She stood poised with pen and pad as if she, not he, had been forced to wait.

"May I take your order?" she asked tersely.

"You may," Desmond shot back, instantly irritated. "Whatever you've got that resembles a hamburger . . . fries . . . and . . ." Here he had to watch himself. "And a Coke." He favored her with a big smile. "And . . ." She froze in the act of reaching for his menu. "Hurry."

She snatched up his unopened menu and hesitated for just a moment before turning on her heel and retreating to the kitchen.

Desmond returned his attention to the train, which continued unchanged, it seemed, in its antediluvian progress. There was still no end in sight. Desmond took a sip of his water and grimaced. It had a slightly rusty taste. He set it back down and glanced at the closed doors of the bar at the end of the dining room. He had been ignoring it since he walked in. Desmond could just make out the interior through the frosted glass and pictured himself comfortably situated there with a bourbon on the rocks. He suddenly felt unfairly burdened by the demands of being a family man. To have to deprive himself of a welcome drink at the end of a long day's drive; a drive, he might add, that was solely to demonstrate that he did, indeed, care for his son and wished to make his wife happy. It was costing him time away from work, and a lot of aggravation. He glanced impatiently around the room for his waitress. She was nowhere to be seen. Outside, the train dragged itself along.

Besides, he queried himself, what was the big payoff for him? Tomorrow morning, when he finally reached his son's college in Morgantown, would there be the warm greeting and shared laughs of a father-and-son reunion? Desmond knew better. Though he had started this journey in high hopes of an opportunity for exactly that, the exhausting drive and dismal landscape had shorn him of such unrealistic expectations. No, he would find the boy as he had last seen him—sullen, uncommunicative, and evasive, if not openly hostile. Justin had brought in the verdict long ago, with his mother as presiding judge: A father was not allowed to have a few drinks at the end of a long day, and God forbid that he should take a little time out for himself now and then—go on a tear, as it were. How could he expect justice from a mere boy who had never struggled a day in his life—a child, really, who had yet to experience anything like real stress?

As for his wife, didn't it matter at all that there had never been

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another woman? Whenever he had taken off, it had always started out as a bar-hopping expedition with the boys from work and progressed from there. He had never hunted skirt, though he could tell her girlfriends a few tales about *their* "wonderful" husbands. No, it had just been for fun. He got carried away from time to time, but he always came home . . . and he always brought home the bacon . . . most of it, anyway . . . and certainly enough for their needs. The company knew his worth, even if his fun-loving ways had cost him a few reprimands and suspensions along the way. You can't keep a good man down, his old man had been fond of saying, and *he* had enjoyed a thirty-year career with ConRail and never left a bottle standing.

The clatter of his order being slammed down startled Desmond from his reverie and the waitress was already marching away when he realized that silence had descended at last. The mile-long train had completed its passage unnoticed.

Across the tracks, he could now see a row of drab two-story buildings. In front of one, a group of disheveled, unshaven men shifted about in the gathering twilight—some with Styrofoam cups that they sipped gingerly from as they glanced from time to time at the closed door. They all appeared to be waiting. A neon sign above the entrance flickered into life announcing "Rescue Mission." Next-door stood a liquor store and corner bar.

Desmond finished a mouthful of soggy burger and signaled the waitress. "Bourbon, please!" His voice carried across the room and the other patrons glanced in his direction. He defiantly stared at each in their turn. "I need *something* to wash this down with," he informed them, as they now studied their own plates with renewed interest.

"Well, Rip, I'm glad to see you've finally joined us."

Desmond opened his eyes with effort, the light behind the closed Venetian blinds causing his sore orbs to throb with pain. He raised a hand to shield his face and groaned and closed his eyes once more. His throat felt very sore as well. *This is not good,* he thought. He knew all the symptoms, and as he catalogued them, found each and every one present and accounted for. He was in for it this time. Linda was going to kill him. "What in hell was I thinking about," he berated himself. "And where in hell am I?"

Then it struck him like a physical blow and he sat up suddenly, only to fall back with a cry from the long silver needle someone had rammed into the back of his skull. "Oh God," he croaked, "The boy . . . I forgot the boy."

"Who's the boy?" That voice again. The son of a bitch should be shot for shouting.

Desmond's lips were sticking together, and they parted with an

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audible smack. "Justin . . ." was all he could get out.

A merciful saint brought a straw to his lips and he reflexively sucked on it; cool water flooded his parched mouth and cascaded down his arid, constricted throat. A little dribbled onto his chin and was instantly dabbed off with a tissue.

"Sorry," she whispered, as if it was her fault. Truly a saint.

Desmond tried to open his eyes once more, in order to see this angel of great beauty and kindness, but the room glowed agonizingly in his vision like an overlit stage scene. He wondered for a moment if he were dead. But only the damned in hell would be in this much pain and discomfort, he reasoned, and surely in that place there would be no cool water.

"Lower your voice," the merciful one instructed the loud, obviously happy man who had spoken earlier.

"Oh . . . right," he whispered almost as loudly as before.

There was the painful squeal of a chair being scraped across the floor and Desmond was suddenly looking up into a large, jovial face. The stench of cheap aftershave wafted nauseatingly into his nostrils and a pair of small grey eyes peered down with piggish good humor into his own.

"Hey," he greeted Desmond with a smile. "I was getting worried that we might never get this opportunity."

Desmond stared back—his head and ears ringing. He was at a complete loss. He had no idea as to how to respond or what was expected of him.

"Lots of folks have been real curious about you." He patted Desmond gently on the shoulder with a great paw. "And I gotta admit, I'm not the least of 'em."

The big man paused and glanced back over his shoulder. Desmond looked beyond him in time to see a white-coated figure nod. The big man resumed. "Yep, you've even made the papers a few times . . . somethin' of a celebrity, I suppose." He leaned in confidentially. "They dubbed you 'Rip Van Doe.' Ain't that a crock?" he chuckled good-naturedly.

Desmond's vision swam and refocused. "Rip?" he murmured to the big face.

"Yeah, you know, like the story—Rip Van Winkle? He went up in the mountains and fell asleep for a buncha years and when he woke up, nobody knew who he was. Remember?"

Desmond felt as if he wasn't getting enough air. "Doe?" he managed.

"Well, that's kinda our fault. When we found you, you didn't have no identification or nothin', so we listed you as a John Doe. 'Fraid the local rag did the rest . . . the Rip Van part," he concluded cheerfully.

Desmond managed to swivel his head to take in his surroundings. Mercifully, the brilliant light was subsiding. It was a hospital

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room, as clean and generic as his motel suite had been. "How long . . ." his voice caught, and the question hung in the air like the mountain mist.

The big man clasped his hands together and lowered his great head as if deep in thought. "Well, one of our boys, Officer Boychuck, I believe, came acrost you round about mid May. It's late October now, so . . ." He threw open his hands. "'bout five and one-half months, that would make it," he finished apologetically.

Desmond felt the words like physical blows as they entered his consciousness and were swept away down the dark, winding corridors of his mind. The sense of loss was sharp and surprising.

"Was I on a tear?" he asked sheepishly, shame making his face hot and sweaty.

Again, the big man patted his arm like a schoolchild and chuckled. "Yeah, partner, I reckon you were, least by some accounts. You were noticed around the tracks and mission area sharin' a bottle with some of the tramps and such that pass through here. Didn't cause no trouble, though," he noted approvingly. "Stood out a bit, however," he added with a wink. "The clothes . . . don't get too many hoboes wearing expensive duds round here. 'Course you weren't wearin' those duds when we found you. All they left you were your skivvies. From the looks of it, you fell off a loading dock and cracked your skull on the tracks. Lucky for you one of our boys spotted you before that mornin' freight was due."

He took a long pause to study the effect of his words. "You've been in a coma all this time, and ain't spoke one word till this day." The nurse, squat and froggish, shouldered by the large man and took a few swipes at Desmond's forehead with a cool, damp cloth. The merciful saint was not how he had pictured her—nothing, it seemed, could be taken at face value.

He recalled leaving the hotel with a good buzz on after an hour or so of visiting the bar. Desmond remembered the raggedy men clustered outside the mission, their faces drawn, weathered, bewhiskered—prematurely old; their clothes reeking of old sweat and the acidic tang of dried urine. He also remembered luring them away from a night's shelter with a bottle of Seagram's Seven. It had seemed like an adventure then, good-natured and generous, and he had felt a bit like Tom Sawyer venturing down to the river after dark—a little dangerous, yes, but promising excitement. With the passing of the bottle, each man had become his Huck Finn, comrade-in-arms and fellow adventurer. He had just intended lightening their daily struggle with a few welcome snorts. This was all he remembered.

"Is my wife here?" He could hear the plaintive whine of his own voice and prayed that he would not begin openly weeping.

The big man looked suddenly uncomfortable. "Well, now . . . I guess

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that's the problem, you see. We wouldn't know who she might be, as we didn't have any idea who you were . . . are," he corrected himself.

"She doesn't know I'm here?" Desmond felt a loneliness as deep as death settle over him and tears flowed down his cheeks unnoticed.

The big man sighed and sat back. "That's about the size of it, I'm afraid. Till now we didn't even know you were married. You mentioned a boy." He consulted a small notebook. "Justin, is it?"

"My son," Desmond sobbed unashamedly. "No one's come looking for me?" he persisted.

"You may be listed as missing out of your home state, I don't know. But without a name and date of birth, I'm afraid you match 'bout a thousand other missing men." The big man gave a shrug and brought his pad to the fore. "All right, then, let's get started settin' things straight, how 'bout it?"

Desmond nodded weakly.

"What's your name?"

Desmond Mercer had never been reported as missing by his wife, nor had any inquiries been made of the Cumberland Police Department. These were things that the kindly Lieutenant Bowie had refrained from saying over the last few days of Desmond's convalescence. Rather, he had allowed Desmond to arrive at these conclusions on his own, and in his own good time, based on the bare facts of his department's investigation. These facts had spoken for themselves, Desmond found, in insinuating whispers during the long quiet evenings between visiting hours and breakfast. But the scream had lain at the end of a telephone line, when on that first day of awareness he had called home, heart pounding, only to find a recorded message that the number was changed and unlisted.

His memories of his arrival and stay in Cumberland only served to deepen the mystery of the circumstances of his misfortune. The police found the record of his check-in at the hotel and . . . his departure. The day clerk had not seen the man who checked into Room 217, only the one who had checked out, and his hazy memory of that unremarkable event provided a description that could easily be applied to Desmond himself. No belongings had been left behind. A check of the parking lot only served to show that his car was no longer there. Whoever had stripped him of his clothes, money, and credit cards had also discovered his room key.

Lieutenant Bowie had only begun to puzzle over how the mysterious double had been able to determine which room the plastic key card went to (as no room number was printed on them for security reasons), when Desmond was able to supply the answer. He had been given a receipt when he had charged his meal to his room. This he had dutifully folded into his wallet. Clearly this was no master criminal at work, but some tramp that had seized his

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good fortune with both hands and made the most of it. In one bold move, he had become Desmond Mercer—robbing the original of everything he ever was or ever would be.

As Desmond sat in the bus depot in an ill-fitting suit donated by a kindly member of the C.P.D., he was sure of only two things. One: Whoever had done this to him could not possibly have foreseen the consequences for Desmond. Two: If it were humanly possible, he intended to find and kill this man.

Desmond felt funny burglarizing his own home, but not funny enough to stop. As he had conjectured, the garage door into the kitchen was left unlocked (Linda was always forgetting her house key) and he felt confident that he could go about his business for several hours, if need be, before she returned home from work. Their small dog had initially put up quite a ruckus as he walked up the drive, but now leapt and leapt for his attention. He knelt and stroked her sleek head for a moment as she tried to lick his face, and a sickening, unwelcome sense of homecoming made itself felt in his belly. He shoved her away, rising quickly to get about his business. The dog followed him at a puzzled distance.

Desmond snatched a wicker basket from atop the refrigerator and slammed it onto the counter. It was overflowing with bills and receipts that he began to rifle through, tossing the ones that held no interest for him into the air. The dog made sport of it by leaping up to snatch those that fluttered enticingly and shredding them with rapid shakes of her head.

In just a few moments, Desmond had reduced the welter of paper to a small pile. These were credit card bills beginning with his trip the previous May. It was those transactions that had occurred after his checking into the hotel that interested him. He leaned over the counter and studied these like a road map leading to his quarry. Disappointingly, there were only a few. The first was for gas in Hagerstown. He was traveling east, Desmond noted. The second was for a nice, big meal at a Denny's in Frederick that same day.

He started to relax the farther he got from Cumberland, Desmond mused.

The third and final entry threw him. It was a five-hundred-dollar purchase from a Home Depot in Gettysburg the following day.

"By God, he's doubled back and turned north," Desmond exclaimed, the excitement of the hunt thrilling him. The dog's ears swiveled in his direction and she began to scent the air, as if she, too, sensed prey.

But it ended there. There were no other transactions, and a sense of the impossibility of his task cloaked him like a hair shirt, both suffocating and irritating—something to be borne or cast off, and he

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could do neither. He had no other purpose but this; no other identity.

His hands shook as he stared at the paper, more evidence of how easily he had been written off. Hadn't his wife questioned these transactions at all? Surely the purchase of hardware must have seemed strange to her, set off some alarm that things weren't right? How often had he made home-improvement purchases when on a drunk?

Desmond angrily stuffed the paper into his pants pocket, where it nestled against a twenty-dollar bill—the last of the money that Lieutenant Bowie had sent him off with. He had claimed that the officers in his department had all tossed some money in the kitty for him, but Desmond didn't really believe that. The large policeman was not good at lying. It seemed, at the time, the kindest thing anyone had ever done, or would probably ever do, for Desmond. When he had waved farewell to that good man from the window of the bus, it had felt as if he were entering a world as dark as his coma, but this time his eyes were wide open.

He mounted the stairs two at a time, with the little dog nipping playfully at his heels. Desmond didn't notice. He retrieved a suitcase from the attic and brought it into his old bedroom and tossed it onto the bed. Throwing it open, he turned to the closet and reached out for some of his shirts hanging there. His hand was arrested in midair, inches from the clothes. He stopped breathing. They weren't his.

With a small, muffled cry, Desmond staggered back and sat down hard on the edge of the bed, burying his face in his hands, and remained that way for several minutes.

Then slowly, with great effort, he hauled himself back to his feet, legs shaking, and stared hard at the unfamiliar clothes. Hurt fed his anger into a white-hot flame as he began to rip suits, shirts, and pants from their hangers and fling them onto the bed. He held one particularly fine suit from a shop he had never visited up to the light. "By God, we wear the same size," he shouted with a triumphant sob to the empty house. The dog sought shelter under the bed.

Within a few minutes, Desmond had stripped out of his baggy, donated clothes and donned the finest of his replacement's. He was mindful to transfer the twenty-dollar bill and credit card receipt, and hastily stuffed everything else that would fit into his suitcase and carried it downstairs. The household cash was in the same kitchen drawer as always, and this, too, he snatched without hesitation. The keys to his son's car hung next to the garage door, and he lifted them off the hook as he walked out. *Hell, the boy won't need the car till the summer,* he reasoned bitterly. *I own it, anyway.*

Desmond began to pull the door to and stopped. He called the dog, and after a few moments' hesitation heard her happily thumping down the stairs. She dashed to her master, tail wagging in anticipa-

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tion of an outing, and gazed up at him expectantly. Desmond stared back and wondered if the new "man of the house" received the same affection from the animal he had once enjoyed. He picked up a hammer that lay on a workbench in the garage and weighed it thoughtfully; the dog continued to stare hopefully into his eyes. The darkness blew back and forth through Desmond's mind like a black curtain in a fitful wind. Distantly, a car door slammed.

Desmond carefully laid the hammer back down. Retrieving the suitcase once more, he stalked from the garage leaving every door open behind him. *She'll stay or she'll go; live or die. Why should she be any different from me?* Desmond thought angrily, as he peeled out of the driveway in his son's car.

As he glanced back, he saw the small, not-very-bright dog blithely following a scent trail that led to a busy nearby intersection. Desmond forced his eyes forward and sped away.

In the end, it had proved ridiculously easy to find him. *Providential, even,* Desmond thought, as he sat watching his Doppelganger's home from the comfort of his son's car.

Upon fleeing his own, he had driven to the Department of Motor Vehicles in order to report his driver's license stolen and, hopefully, be issued a new one. He didn't know what the future might hold for him, but he did know that he wouldn't get very far without some form of identification. Instead, he had received the address of the man he had sworn to kill. It had been a simple, innocent exchange.

When he had explained the purpose of his visit, and given the sympathetic clerk his name and home address for verification, the unexpected had happened. After typing in the information and bringing up his license on the screen, the man had looked perplexed and glanced nervously at Desmond. "You're reporting your license stolen?" he queried.

"Yeah," Desmond began. "In Cumber—" he stopped short. "What's that say?"

The clerk glanced back at the glowing screen. "It says you turned it in and applied for a new one in West Virginia. . . . Could that be right?"

Desmond felt the first stirrings of hope. "Well . . ." He grinned sheepishly, leaning forward so that the clerk could get a good look at the jagged, still-livid scar that ran through his hairline. "I was in an accident up that way 'bout six months ago. I'm afraid it played hell with my memory for a while." He wasn't lying altogether. Even the West Virginia part . . . hadn't that been his ultimate destination, after all?

The clerk drew back with a grimace. "Damn . . . you did take a crack on the head," he observed sympathetically.

"Did I use my brother's or uncle's address on that?" Desmond

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inquired evenly.

"I wouldn't know that," the helpful clerk exclaimed, and then proceeded to read the address aloud from the screen.

"That would be my uncle's," Desmond lied. "So sorry to have troubled you,"

"No trouble," the kindly bureaucrat replied as he watched Desmond stride purposefully out the door.

"My wife, my life, everything, for a hillbilly's double-wide in the mountains," Desmond mumbled, then spat contemptuously out the car window. His quarry glanced nervously in his direction as he crossed his rocky yard from his work shed to his house, weaving in and out of his creations: handcrafted lawn chairs, porch swings, birdhouses, even miniature windmills. Desmond's car sat in the driveway sporting West Virginia plates like a reproach.

Desmond had made no secret of his presence, and the fact that the watched had not approached the watcher only served to convince him that he was not only right but righteous. Here, clearly, was a man whose conscience prevented him from taking those simple steps open to the innocent—inquiry, confrontation, or simply calling the police.

He shuffled across his stony patch like a whipped dog, with occasional fearful glances at his tormentor. This was a pattern that had gone on for several hours and Desmond found himself enjoying it.

A tired-looking woman came to the window after the man went inside, and studied him, but after a few moments, a hand on her shoulder pulled her away. Desmond felt swollen with power. A power that had suffused him since the moment his prey's location was revealed to him. "This was meant to be," Desmond whispered to the empty yard.

It took repeated blows to the flimsy door to finally produce an occupant. To the man's credit, Desmond thought, he did not send his wife to answer the summons.

They stood staring into each other's eyes for several moments before the mountain man shifted his gaze to his feet and said, "Yessir," in a hoarse voice.

They were of a kind, Desmond observed coolly—roughly the same height and weight; even the same hair and eye color. He was possibly five years younger than Desmond, but hard living was written all over his lined face and he could certainly pass as older. He wondered briefly why this cringing man had even come to the door.

"Mr. Mercer? Desmond Mercer?" Desmond inquired politely.

There was a long pause as the man appeared to be actually shrinking with dread.

"Yessir." His reply was barely audible.

"Did you make this?" Desmond asked pleasantly, holding up a

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two-story, gingerbread-style birdhouse he had picked up in the yard.

This time, the false Desmond could not even make a reply, but dumbly nodded.

"Well, that explains the side trip to the hardware store." And with that Desmond heaved it up and brought it crashing down on the head of the man who had stolen everything from him.

The miniature house exploded into dozens of pieces of wood and minute latticework, sending the stunned victim staggering back into his home. The entire house rocked as he slammed against the far wall and slumped to a sitting position, blood streaming from his scalp. Desmond was vaguely aware of the plump, weary-looking wife running in from the kitchen, wailing in fear and outrage.

"Don't, mister! Don't!" she cried, straddling her husband's prostrate form. Beneath her, he groaned and clutched his head, blinded by the blood that ran into his face. Desmond noted, as in a dream, that she wielded a large butcher knife. It did not alarm him.

Instead, he was drawn to a shotgun propped in a corner of the mobile home. Why hadn't he answered the door with this, Desmond wondered, even as he calmly retrieved it, broke it open to be sure it was loaded, and, satisfied, snapped the breech closed with a loud crack. Outside, air brakes hissed, followed by the unmistakable sound of a school-bus door clacking open. The shouts and laughter of children wafted into the room like evidence of life on another planet. He took a step toward his prey.

"Daddy!" The girls screamed simultaneously and rushed past the shotgun-wielding stranger as if he didn't exist, to fling themselves over their wounded father.

"Mister, don't!" the wife warned yet again, making threatening, pitiful swipes at the air.

Desmond took a step closer, bringing the gun to bear. He dimly registered that the two skinny girls might be in the way. "Stand away," he demanded.

The older of the two—a pale, pouty-looking eleven-year-old—turned to face him, her eyes full of tears and defiance. "You better git outta here and leave my daddy be!" The younger began to cry as if her heart would break, her face buried in her father's shoulder, oblivious of the blood.

Desmond gazed at the tableau as at a great work of art that he could not fully comprehend—puzzled, troubled, yet mesmerized by its unlikely, inexplicable beauty. He couldn't look away. "This should have been mine," he stated sadly to no one in particular.

The other Desmond had begun to recover himself, and managed to stand, shoving the girls behind him in the process. He wiped the blood from his eyes with his sleeve.

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"Mister, you've got every right, but please don't hurt my family. They ain't to blame," he pleaded thickly while swaying like a man on a pitching deck. "They're no part o' this."

"No," Desmond corrected him. "They're every part of this."

"It was me what done it. Caused everything, I mean. It was the damned bottle. I couldn't leave it alone, and it cost me . . . us, that is, everything we had—my job, our house, car . . . everything. I run off like a coward, which I was . . . still am, as you can see." He gestured weakly, as if anyone could see his fault.

"Then you came across me," Desmond prompted. "In Cumberland."

"Yessir . . . I did. I thought you was dead, mister, and that's God's own truth. I never woulda done it otherwise. I hope you believe me on that part."

Desmond made no answer; thinking only that now they would even share a similar scar on their skulls. The new Desmond went on with his confession.

"It weren't right . . . but at the time, it was like God's providence . . . a second chance."

"God's providence," Desmond repeated, recognizing the phrase.

"I used your money to buy tools for my business; my own I'd done sold off for whiskey and such. When I got back, I told the old lady what I done." He nodded toward his wife, the knife still in her hand, but now pointing at the floor. "She scolded me good, but I wouldn't listen. It was a chance, you see, and it was me determined to take it. I made 'em come along."

Desmond was aware of the soft weeping of both girls now in the quiet room.

"So I got credit cards in your name, and closed out your old one. Did the same with your license and car and moved us here to set up shop," the new Desmond continued in a rush, as if every word were a relief. "'Course, I guess I knew there'd be a reckoning someday; I was always lookin' over my shoulder—I just never guessed it would be you."

The woman spoke up. "Some good come of it, mister. He swore he'd never take another drop, and he ain't. He was always a good man but for that bottle, and praise God, that at least is behind us. He's done wonderful well by us since."

Desmond's eyes wandered over their meager, shabby possessions and back to the contrite, brave man and the family that was willing to die for him.

"You stole nothing of value from me," he announced quietly, leaning the shotgun against the wall. "I possessed nothing of value. As to my 'identity' . . ." Desmond laughed bitterly. "You've already made better use of it than I ever did."

With that said, he left the bewildered family and drove away. It no longer mattered where. ●

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Farber and the Vanishing Blonde

by Gordon Cotler

The voice was strong and clear. Without being particularly loud, it carried unmistakably across the precinct lobby from the duty sergeant's desk to where Farber was pulling on his windbreaker at the front door.

"That's about the stupidest thing I've ever heard," the woman said.

It may have been the statement, it may have been that the speaker was an attractive young woman, or maybe it was that things were slow in Homicide and Farber had too much time on his hands. Whatever the reason, he found himself crossing the lobby with his coat half on, half flapping, while he said, "What's the stupidest thing you ever heard?" At the inquiring look from her troubled brown eyes he mumbled, "Name's Farber. I collect stupid things."

"Not your department, Lieutenant," the duty sergeant said, warning him off.

"I don't care whose department it is," the young woman snapped. Up close, it appeared her perfect nose had been enhanced by cosmetic surgery and her teeth were possibly too good to be true, but the eyes were real and they were appealing. She said, "My roommate's missing and this man won't do anything about it. Have you ever heard anything more outrageous?"

"How long is she missing?" Farber said.

"Three hours."

This new Farber story is set, the author explains, "peripherally in the world of soap opera—oddly, the area of TV in which I have the least experience. My decades in the medium were spent mostly writing movies of the week and long-form pilots. . . . I also have fond memories of my work on comedy and musical shows." When he wasn't writing for TV, Mr. Cotler wrote mystery novels, one an Edgar winner and another Edgar nominated.

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"That's why the good sergeant can't help you. People disappear every day in this city for perfectly innocent reasons—innocent, anyway, in the eyes of the law. Your friend will have to be missing at least forty-eight hours before you can file a report. History tells us it's probably too soon for you to start worrying."

The young woman's eyes blazed. "Is it? She went for a walk with her dog. She loves that dog. He was found tied to a parking meter five blocks from home. He'd been there for at least two hours. No Marsha anywhere. She might leave Buster outside a store for ten or fifteen minutes, but two hours? Not in a million years!"

Farber considered this and indicated a bench on the opposite wall. He said, "I'll give you five minutes." He took the girl by the elbow and guided her across the lobby, followed by a quizzical look from the sergeant.

When they were settled, he said, "Tell me about your roommate."

"Marsha Pembroke. By the way, I'm Faye Gayle." She rummaged in her purse and produced a photo of an attractive blonde, about twenty-five. "Marsha's an actress. We both are, except that she's making it. She has a running part in a soap and she's out at the studio in Queens two or three days a week. Long days. That's why when she's home she takes Buster everywhere she goes."

"What kind of dog is he?"

"A mutt. Little of this, lot of schnauzer. Small and sad-faced; that's why she named him Buster. For Buster Keaton. You know, the—"

"I know, the sad-faced clown." He cut in before she could add, "From your day."

"Anyway," the girl went on—she couldn't have been much over twenty—"they went out around three and when they weren't back by five I called her boyfriend. Because she'd said she'd be back in half an hour. Mitch—that's the boyfriend, Mitch Keller—lives and works in a little old building he owns a couple of blocks south of us. He's a cabinetmaker. Anyway, Mitch said Marsha had dropped by just after three. She seemed to have something on her mind, something really bothering her, and she'd only stayed a few minutes, for which I suspect he was grateful, because Mitch hates to be interrupted when he's working. Anyway, Marsha can't stand the sawdust in her nostrils." The sound of her own voice seemed to soothe the young woman.

"Did she have the dog with her?" Farber said.

"I asked that. Yes."

"Do you have any idea what might be troubling Marsha?"

"I can guess. I'd noticed it, too. Her show's coming to the end of a contract period and there's a question of whether she'll be renewed for next season. This is her first and she's heard a rumor that her character is going to be killed off by a falling elevator or a

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brain embolism. Something. But another rumor has it that her character's going to get pregnant by one of the cast regulars. That would guarantee her steady employment for God knows how long. It could go either way."

"Who makes that decision?"

"The head writer, I'd guess. Clinton Peck. A real pain in the butt, according to Marsha."

"Could she have tied up the dog and gone to see Peck?"

"That passed through my mind. She was headed south and Peck's office is maybe a dozen blocks south of where she left the dog. I phoned the office and got a machine." She shook her head impatiently. "But why would she leave Buster?"

"She wouldn't have if she took a taxi, but suppose she jumped on a bus? No dogs allowed on city buses."

"It's true, there's a bus stop next to where Buster was left. But it still doesn't add up. To leave Buster . . ." She trailed off in doubt. Then, "I just brought him home. The poor thing is a total wreck."

"How did you learn where the dog was?"

"Didn't I mention that? I had a call from Marsha's dentist—he's mine, too, Paul Chastney. He has a street-entrance office on Seventy-third Street, five blocks south of us. He went out for something or other around three-thirty and spotted Buster tied up practically at his door. He assumed Marsha was on errands in the neighborhood. When he closed the office at five-thirty, the dog was still there. That's when he called our home number."

"You know this dentist well?"

"Paul?" Her cheeks colored. "We both do. Actresses have a lot of corrective dental work. Plenty of time to become friendly with the man who performs the magic. Paul's young, the three of us hang out once in a while."

"And Marsha didn't have an appointment this afternoon?"

"Paul says no. She didn't even poke her head in to say hi. Wouldn't you expect that when she was right there?"

Farber fell silent. Nothing he could do now would be of any help. If Marsha Pembroke had met with foul play, the deed was already done. But she was an actress, probably impulsive and possibly irresponsible. She could be anywhere. Missing people usually turn up unharmed. That's why the police, he reminded himself, let a good chunk of time pass before they get involved. The odds were that she was okay. He tried to look reassuring.

Sylvie Farber owned and operated a suburban bookstore, but when she took her lunch break in the book-lined stockroom she invariably spent it watching television. Her husband teased her mercilessly over this habit. "A fine example you set your customers," he was fond of saying.

Sylvie's defense was always the same. "Would you rather I got

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egg salad on the merchandise? And can we change the subject?"

The subject came up again tonight. As they finished dinner—weeknight dinners were at the kitchen table—Bernie pulled out the photograph of Marsha Pembroke that her roommate had pressed on him. "Do you ever watch the soap opera *Life Is for Living?*"

Sylvie put down her coffee cup. "Bernie, are we launched on another session of 'Bash the Philistine'?"

"No, I'm calling on you for expert testimony." He showed her the picture. "Have you ever seen this woman?"

Sylvie barely glanced at the print. "The bitch," she said at once. Then, "I mean the character she plays. Willa something. She's new this season but she's already wrecked a marriage and broken up an engaged couple. Willa goes for the jugular." She looked squarely at her husband. "Don't tell me she's making trouble in the real world?"

"She may be more troubled than trouble. She seems to have taken a five-block stroll this afternoon and then vanished into thin air."

Sylvie wriggled forward in her chair. "Tell me," she breathed. In the chorus of crime groupies Sylvie was a soloist.

Rather than wait till she had nagged it out of him, Bernie told her everything he knew about the missing actress.

"What are the odds on foul play?" Sylvie asked.

"Against a national model of probability? Highly unlikely."

"I don't care about national models."

"If we narrow it down to people who leave their dog tied up in the street for—" he consulted his watch—"it's now four hours, I'd say there's a fair chance Ms. Pembroke is in serious trouble."

Sylvie examined her husband's grim expression. He said, "She's gotten through a few scrapes as Willa. Let's see if she can do it as Marsha."

But real life proved too tough for Marsha Pembroke. Her body turned up the next morning on a shoulder of the Saw Mill River Parkway about ten minutes north of the city. Whoever had broken her neck the previous afternoon had waited till night to dump the body. "At least his choice of location narrows the field of suspects," Farber said when he got off the phone.

"It does? How?" Sylvie said.

"The perp had to have access to a car."

Sylvie had been about to leave for work when Farber took the call. "Poor Willa," she said now, no longer in a hurry. "Although some of her followers will say, 'Good riddance, she had it coming.'"

"Maybe Willa did, but hey, remember? It was Marsha Pembroke who was murdered."

"Some people get so deep into those soaps they don't recognize the difference." She was struck by a thought. "You think she might have been done in by a righteous viewer?"

"I hope not. From what you tell me, we'd have to grill half the

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show's fans. There's a good team on this from the Two-Four. While they do the pick-and-shovel work, I'm going to start where Marsha's trail ended."

"Where the dog was tied up? Outside the dentist's office?"

"Exactly." He was flipping through his notebook. "Dr. Paul Chastney."

"I'll bet he's tall and dark, with a strong chin and a thick head of hair. Right out of the soaps." Sylvie shivered with anticipation.

Dr. Chastney was tall enough and not bad-looking, but his chin, Farber decided, was a shade too weak to make it on the soaps. He had just finished with a patient when Farber showed up and short-stopped the next patient from taking the chair in the sleek state-of-the-art surgery. "I won't be long," he promised, flashing his badge and closing the door to the waiting room.

"This is about Marsha Pembroke, isn't it?" said Dr. Chastney. "Faye Gayle phoned me with the news. She sounded totally shattered. What a hideous business. And a tragic end to a promising career." He sounded more dutiful than regretful.

"Yes, a tragedy," Farber said, and got down to business. "As I heard it, Marsha tied her dog to a parking meter practically at your door, but she didn't come into the office."

"Why would she? She didn't have an appointment."

"I understood you two had a personal relationship."

"Yes, we're casual friends. But a visit during office hours . . ." His gesture made clear that would never do.

"Then how did you discover the dog?"

"I park my car at the curb and have to feed the damn meter once an hour. My assistant usually does it, but she's been out ill the past couple of days. I saw Buster on two meter-feeding expeditions and then I called the girls' number."

"Which you got from your files or off the top of your head?"

A sly grin. "You mean, how close am I to those two women?"

"I was too flip. You don't have to answer that."

"I don't mind. Caps are the best friend to a dentist's retirement account. When you're in someone's mouth an hour a week for X number of weeks you've established an intimate relationship. Does that answer your question?"

"Graphically. Is there anything you can think of that might help us in our investigation?"

The doctor considered this request. "Marsha was a strong woman, a confrontational woman. And damn good-looking. I'm not surprised that she got herself in a jam of some sort. Whatever it was, it had nothing to do with me. And now if you'll excuse me, I have a patient waiting to be tormented."

Dr. Chastney was certainly not in deep mourning for his lost friend.

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Clinton Peck's office turned out to be a bare-walled studio apartment in a faceless residential high-rise near Lincoln Center. It was furnished with a large desk, a computer, a row of metal file drawers, and a studio couch. It had all the charm of a monk's cell. "You don't live here, do you?" Farber asked. He had phoned ahead that he was coming.

"Good God, no," Peck replied. "I come in two or three times a week to meet my muse." Ruefully, "She doesn't always show up. I'm a country boy. Northern Westchester." "Boy" was stretching it past hyperbole; he was fifty-plus, pudgy, in need of a shave, and unkempt. At that, come to think of it, he was something like an overripe boy.

Farber said, "My apologies for catching you at a bad time—losing an actress. I'd guess you've got your work cut out for you writing her out of the show."

"Not at all, the work's basically done. It's a damn shame about Marsha. I hardly knew her but she was a good little actress."

"How will you dispose of the character she plays?"

Peck considered for a moment. "This is not yet for public consumption, but in due course it will be revealed that Willa Wade has been hideously scarred by an angry rival who threw acid in her face. She will be bandaged to the eyebrows for months and eventually revealed as a new actress. One bob-nosed young blonde looks pretty much like the next."

Farber's professionalism surged. "Acid wouldn't change the structure of the face."

"So? There's medicine and there's *soap opera* medicine," Peck snapped. "Look, I'm the head writer. I create the character and story arcs—the show's bible. I do a bit of editing, but four underlings flesh out the daily episodes."

"Where are they?"

"At home. Through the magic of the Internet we rarely need to meet."

"So the show is not in trouble."

"Not nearly. I could slap a blond wig on Marsha Pembroke's roommate and she'd make an acceptable Willa."

Farber's eyes widened. "You know Faye Gayle?"

"I rarely remember actresses we don't hire, but this one has stuck in my head."

"Why is that?"

"She read for Willa the same day Marsha Pembroke did. It came out that they were roommates, a rare occurrence at castings. We liked both readings."

"Who's 'we'?"

"The casting committee—producer, the casting woman, and your humble servant."

"I would guess that you're the five-hundred-pound gorilla."

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"That's what Marsha figured. She called me here later that day to say how much she enjoyed reading for me, how 'challenging' it had been. That was nervy enough. Then, somehow, she let it be known—ever so delicately—that if she got the part sexual favors would follow." He had been swiveling in his desk chair, but now he leaned forward across the desk. "I thought, 'This is what Willa would do. Marsha Pembroke is Willa to the bone.' So she got the role."

He leaned back in the chair, having sailed through the hard part, and said, "Of course I claimed no sexual favors. Yes, there's a certain amount of that in this line of work. If you're in footwear you get shoes. In show business . . ." He shrugged. "But I'm a family man."

"Without that phone call, would Faye Gayle have gotten the part?"

"She might very well have. But Marsha cut her roommate off at the pass. It was cold, it was calculating, it was pure Willa Wade."

Having established a conversational bond, Farber asked the question that had brought him here. "Did Marsha come to see you yesterday afternoon?"

Again Peck leaned forward, his elbows on the desk. "No," he said firmly. "What would make you think she had?"

"She was headed in this direction when she disappeared. She stopped at her boyfriend's and at her dentist's office and then the trail ended. I thought she might have come here. To find out if her contract was being picked up. And maybe to couple that question with a renewal of her previous generous offer."

"Marsha was not here yesterday."

"Something tells me I'm close. How about day before yesterday?"

"No."

"We can play twenty questions or you can tell me. When was she here?"

Grudgingly, "Four or five days ago."

"To discuss her contract?"

"She wanted to talk about her part. The direction it was taking. Bernard Shaw had it right when he said, 'Hell is an actor talking seriously about his work.' I kept it vague with Marsha. I told her nothing. Once you open up to one actor, none of them will leave you alone."

"But after meeting with Marsha, did your decision about her future go into the—what do you call it?—the bible?" Peck went tight-lipped. "You might as well tell me. I can always get it from your quartet of gospel writers."

"We decided to renew her contract. We had considered dumping her, but the story possibilities were just too tempting to dismiss. Willa Wade is the eye of a hurricane on *Life Is for Living,* an energy source too valuable to kill off."

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Okay, that was something. Not a lot, but something. There wasn't much more Farber could learn here. He edged towards the door. "I won't take up any more of your time. Thanks for the help," he said.

Farber had sensed that Peck hated to see him go. The writer's creative juices were simmering. "You going to talk to the boyfriend?" he asked. Real-life plots were dancing in his head. "I've never met him, but Marsha Pembroke's boyfriend would have to have a cast-iron constitution."

Farber had no intention of staying for a story conference. With a polite warning to Peck to keep himself available, he was out the door.

The two-story taxpayer that housed Mitch Keller's showroom, workshop, and residence was just off the avenue. A side panel of the van out front read KELLER DESIGNS. Three young men were loading it with sections of what looked like a library wall. Quality work in an upscale hardwood.

"Mr. Keller?" Farber addressed the question to the group. They were three of a kind—artsy-craftsy types; two sported creative beards.

"Mitch is inside," one of the men said, indicating the building. "But if it's about work, he's not seeing customers today."

Farber flashed his credentials.

"Is this about his girlfriend?" another of the men said. "His fiancée? Mitch is taking some time off. We wouldn't be working ourselves, but we promised to finish this installation."

"You guys the entire staff?" Farber asked.

"We're it," said the first man. "And we'll be out of here as soon as we load the van."

Farber nodded and went into the building. The first room was a showroom. A few artful samples, tastefully displayed: wall units, tables, desks—high-end work. Behind it was an open door to a workroom. Mitch Keller, a wiry guy not yet thirty with big shoulders and a prominent nose, slumped in a folding chair, his feet propped on a worktable. He wore a pained expression and stared at a corner of the room. He made no sign that Farber's entrance registered.

Once he was in the room, Farber saw the television set in the corner. Marsha Pembroke, vibrantly alive in a clingy cocktail dress, was letting an older man in hospital whites have a piece of her mind. The sound was off, but there was no mistaking the young woman's sneering contempt and the elderly man's distress.

After a few moments the scene ended and the show went to a commercial. Keller blinked and turned to Farber. "I think they taped this day before yesterday," he said in a tight voice. "Willa Wade planting her final land mine." His mouth worked silently, as though testing what he would say. Then, carefully controlled,

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"Marsha was one hell of an actress." Through his heavy brows he shot Farber an appraising look. "You a cop?"

Farber introduced himself. "I won't keep you long. A few questions," he said. "To help us in our investigation."

"We were going to be married in eight weeks. How about that?" Keller's shoulders were knotted in grief.

Farber made a gesture of sympathy. "Marsha came to see you yesterday afternoon?"

"She dropped by for a few minutes. She didn't hang around."

"Because you were working?"

"Matter of fact, I wasn't. The guys were out on a job and I could have used the company. But she had an appointment and the mutt kept pulling at the leash, so they took off."

"Who was her appointment with?"

"Beats me."

"You didn't ask?"

"I think I did." His bony face darkened. "But Marsha always set our conversational agenda and she was on another tack—wedding plans. I never asked again. It didn't seem important. Is it?"

"I don't know." Farber moved further into the room and sat on the edge of a half-finished desk. *Keep it informal, Bernie, you'll learn more.* "So the two of you talked wedding plans. That can go on for hours, if my experience is typical."

"There was no 'hours,' man. Like I said, Marsha hadn't set out to see me. I was a convenient stop on her way to an appointment. She was in and out of here in minutes."

"'Appointment' goes with 'dental' to me. Could she have had a dental appointment?"

"You mean because that's where the dog was found? I don't think so. She'd have said. When something hurt, Marsha let you know." Keller was looking more upset by the minute. "Are we about through here?"

"Almost. Did Marsha express concern to you about her future on the soap opera?"

"Yeah. And I told her she was crazy to worry. Marsha was a fantastic actress. She pulled all the fan mail this season playing that world-class bitch. She touched a nerve, you know what I mean? Why would they write her out of the show? But yeah, she worried. Marsha worried about things she couldn't control."

Sylvie Farber had been home for an hour and dinner preparations were well advanced when Bernie walked in. One look at his face told her the day had not gone well, but long experience had taught her not to ask questions—at least until coffee. Tonight she was able to restrain her curiosity about the soap-opera murder until they were in bed, a first, for which she was justly proud.

"So, how's the case going?" she said as she slipped beneath the

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covers, adding, in case he needed reminding, "The corpse on the Saw Mill River Parkway." She made a point of leaving her bed light on.

"You really want to know?" Bernie said, climbing in beside her. And then, in a semi-official tone he hoped would shut off further questions, "The investigation is just getting under way."

"Zippo, huh?" Sylvie said. "I figured as much. All those intense fans out there in TV-land who can't stand Willa Wade . . . I knew this wouldn't be easy." She wore an I-told-you-so look.

Bernie was not going to be allowed to sleep until he brought his wife up to speed on the Marsha Pembroke case. He did so rapidly but in full, concluding with, "Trace evidence indicates the body was wrapped in a rug. The victim weighed roughly a hundred and ten pounds. Into a car she went, and out on a parkway that is pretty close to deserted in the middle of the night."

Sylvie sat bolt upright with a bright idea. "How about checking the toll system for an E-Z Pass match to people in her life?"

"Relax, love, it's being done. No obvious ties to the victim have been found so far. The perp may have come onto the parkway above the toll station when he discovered that all the side roads were crowded with suburban homes. The parkway is dead quiet at that hour."

Sylvie was on another tack. "If the killer wasn't an angry fan—" she began.

"Are you still on that?"

"—then my money's on that smug head writer," she continued. "Peck? She may have been heading for his place when her trail dead-ended."

"She was also pointed towards Times Square, Macy's, and Battery Park."

"Bernie, don't be cute. She was in an affair with Peck—not because of his charm but because of his life-and-death control of the show. He could make Marsha a star or kill off her character. Talk about godlike powers!" Her eyes widened in wonder, then narrowed. "Suppose he wanted to end the affair?"

Sylvie was beginning to percolate with possibilities. "Maybe Marsha threatened to go to his wife—"

"And maybe," Farber broke in, "you're lifting this scenario from *Life Is for Living.*"

"It's entirely original," Sylvie said. Suddenly she looked doubtful. "But how did Peck get the body out of that apartment house and to his car, wherever that was?"

"I hate to encourage you, love, but Peck's building has direct elevator access to the basement garage. At, say, three A.M., he's got both the elevator and the garage to himself."

"Then you agree with me . . . ?" Sylvie was pleased.

"You may be on to something," Bernie said. It was that or there

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would be no sleep for either of them. "Good work, love." He reached across her to the light. "And *good night.*"

The following evening Bernie got home well before his wife. By the time Sylvie opened the front door he had chilled two glasses in the freezer and filled a pitcher to the brim with ice in anticipation of a celebratory round of his widely respected martinis.

"You've solved the soap-opera murder," Sylvie said, even before her coat was off.

"With a full confession." They were in the kitchen, where he had assembled gin, vermouth, and olives for the sacred ceremony.

"A confession. That was fast," Sylvie said, wriggling out of her coat and throwing it over the back of a chair. "The killer must have done something really dumb."

"Don't they all?" Bernie said. "That's why we cops usually win."

"Peck. It had to be Peck. Come on. Give."

Bernie didn't have to be coaxed. "The Saw Mill River Parkway did him in," he began. "He was smart enough to avoid the toll station, but dumb enough to drive on the Parkway at all. An alert Westchester patrol car ticketed him at four-fifteen A.M."

"For what?"

"Driving on a parkway with commercial plates. There's a law against that."

"Not Peck. Then who—?"

"Mitch Keller, in his van, 'Keller Designs.'"

"The man she was engaged to? For heaven's sake, why?"

"Call it the persuasiveness of the medium. The poor sap watched his girl three afternoons a week wrecking homes and wreaking havoc. A seed was planted and it took. He began to wonder whether she had more Willa Wade in her than the role called for. The suspicions finally broke into the open. He accused Marsha of having an affair with someone, anyone, probably her dentist. Marsha could give as good as she got and the argument escalated into a shoving match. The final shove from Mitch sent her falling backwards against a vise clamped to a worktable. The M.E. thinks the blow to the head killed her almost instantly."

"Not a pretty way to go," Sylvie breathed.

"Mitch was left with a dead fiancée and a live dog. He hid the body and walked Buster a few blocks south to the dentist's office. With a hope and a prayer."

"Was Marsha having an affair with that dentist?"

"Who knows? And does it matter? The perception was enough for Mitch."

Sylvie sank into the chair beside her coat. "The power of make-believe. Awesome."

Bernie held up the gin bottle. "A toast to good police work?"

Sylvie said, "I thought you'd never ask." ●

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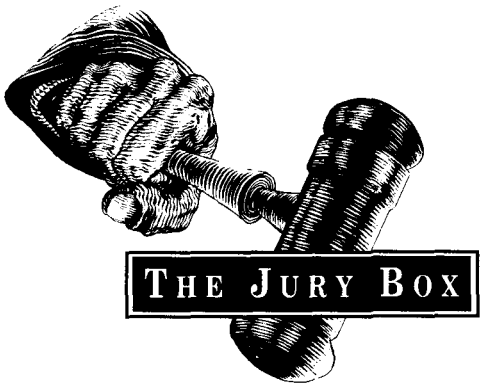

by Jon L. Breen

The glory days of radio mystery extended from the 1930s through '50s, but some are determined to keep the lost (or maybe just misplaced) art of dramatic radio alive through recordings of old shows—that admirable outfit Radio Spirits (radiospirits.com), for example, offers tapes of *Dragnet, Richard Diamond, Suspense, The Whistler,* and many other mystery series—or through new programs in the traditional style.

Jim French Productions (jimfrenchproductions.com) offers an array of fully professional programs, of which the flagship is *The Adventures of Harry Nile,* which debuted on Seattle radio in 1976 and now totals more than 150 episodes. Chronologically based between the late '30s and early '50s, eleven volumes of shows, usually six to a CD, are available at $15.95 each. Sampling volume 11, I found the programs unremarkable in plotting but rich in old-radio ambience, most reminiscent of the Sam Spade program, though less insistently facetious. Also on offer are fine Raffles adaptations, new Sherlock Holmes adventures, and an enjoyable paranormal investigative series, *Kincaid The Strange-Seeker.*

Only a few episodes of *The Adventures of Ellery Queen,* one of the best of the 1940s mystery series, have been available on tape. Some scripts were published in *EQMM* or in Queen anthologies, but most of those in a new collection of 14 have been unavailable in any form since their initial broadcast.

**** Ellery Queen: *The Adventure of the Murdered Moths and Other Radio Mysteries,* Crippen & Landru, $45 hardcover with additional short play in pamphlet form, $20 trade paper. The volume begins superbly with "The Adventure of the Last Man Club," broadcast on June 25, 1939, and finishes with the especially ingenious title story, broadcast on May 9, 1945. The early one-hour scripts,

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represented by the first nine, are often more complex in plot and fully-fleshed in characters. Apart from dying messages, impossible crimes, and fairly presented clues, the scripts display the Queenian knack for varied backgrounds and telling period details. (Along with Marvin Lachman and Ted Hertel, Jr., I read some of the scripts and made selection recommendations to publisher Douglas G. Greene.)

*** Max Allan Collins: *The War of the Worlds Murder,* Berkley, $7.50. The radio medium's most notorious prank, the H.G. Wells adaptation that caused a national panic in 1938, is the latest subject in a fine historical series, featuring an excellent depiction of Orson Welles and his Mercury Theatre cohorts. The mystery is slighter than usual but appropriate to the subject matter. Collins's reminiscences of the 1975 Chicago Bouchercon (including a skewering of the pseudonymous guest of honor) lead into the fictional plot with Shadow creator Walter B. Gibson as amateur sleuth.

*** Rupert Holmes: *Swing,* Random, $24.95. In his second novel, a multitalented double Edgar winner in the Best Play category takes us back to 1940 and the Golden Gate Exposition, where Ray Sherwood, a jazz-band saxophonist haunted by family tragedy, agrees to arrange a student musical composition and becomes involved in murder and intrigue. Musicians especially should appreciate the clever use of the orchestration process as key to a mystery plot. The novel is accompanied by a half-hour CD of excellent original music in period style, with music and lyrics (and in some cases vocal performance) by author Holmes. (One rare anachronism: Today in the San Francisco Bay Area, and certainly in 1940, the University of California campus is known simply as Cal, not Cal Berkeley.)

*** Lyn Hamilton: *The Moai Murders,* Berkley, $22.95. Toronto antique dealer Lara McClintoch travels to Rapa Nui (a.k.a. Easter Island) and becomes involved with the various attendees at a conference on the mysterious statues of the title. In an example of the travelogue mystery at its best, geographical and historical details are perfectly balanced with the surprising and fairly clued whodunit plot.

*** Deborah Donnelly: *Death Takes a Honeymoon,* Dell, $5.99. Seattle wedding planner Carnegie Kincaid goes to Idaho's Sun Valley for the wedding of an old college friend turned TV star and winds up working in both her professional and amateur sleuthing capacities. Was her firefighter cousin's death in a smoke-jumping accident actually murder? Though this one lacks the fair-play cluing of *Died to Match* (2002) and I hated the cliffhanger ending, Carnegie remains one of my favorite current amateur detec-

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tives thanks to the nice handling of the disparate plot elements, the effective action-suspense climax, and the customary verbal and situational humor.

*** Kathy Lynn Emerson: *Face Down Below the Banqueting House,* Perseverance, $13.95. In 1573, a pernicious advance man for Queen Elizabeth I who is planning a not-entirely-welcome visit to the estate of the happily widowed herbalist sleuth Susanna, Lady Appleton, causes no end of trouble. A remarkable store of vivid historical detail adds to the interest of an intriguing plot.

** Alex Flinn: *Fade to Black,* HarperTempest, $16.99. This young adult "problem" novel, concerning an attack on an HIV-positive Florida high school student and the classmate who becomes the obvious suspect, is sensitively written and should enthrall its target readership, but it works better as tolerance lesson than mystery. The novel seeks to explode myths about HIV, but the way the student was infected, though possible, is among the least likely modes of transmission.

** J.A. Konrath: *Bloody Mary,* Hyperion, $22.95. The second case for Chicago police detective Jacqueline "Jack" Daniels moves from the hunt for a serial killer who leaves behind dismembered body parts to a get-the-scumbag legal novel. The most interesting sequences involve the killer's methods of beating the polygraph and his other efforts to get off on an insanity plea. Like so many in the current market, the novel has too much emphasis on the main character's romantic and family life. Also used as padding are "humanizing" cop conversations that hark back to *Dragnet.*

** Stephen Spignesi: *Dialogues,* Bantam, $23. Why did Tory Troy, an animal-shelter euthanasia technician, murder six of her colleagues in the shelter gas chamber, and is she competent to stand trial? This ambitious first novel, told almost entirely in dialogue, starts beautifully and grips the reader for most of its length, but loses credibility with some unconvincing courtroom action. The conclusion is a variation on an old chestnut that sometimes works but this time doesn't.

For enthusiasts of pulp magazines, once as pervasive and now as lost as radio drama, Wildside Press offers facsimile editions of two complete issues at $19.95 each. At the time of its second number (May 1920), *The Black Mask* had not yet assumed its pioneering hard-boiled identity, and there are no Dalys or Hammetts or Gardners on the contents page; most likely to ring a bell with very knowledgeable buffs is Valentine Williams. *Sinister Stories,* represented by its first issue (February 1940), belongs to the weird-menace school with a typical sex/torture/bondage cover and also lacks big names.

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Art by Darryl Elliott

The Aura of an Alpha Wolf

by Jeremiah Healy

"Mr. Cuddy?" said the woman in the corridor, peering like a Marx Brother around the edge of my partially opened office door.

I stood from behind my desk, gesturing to the stenciled "JOHN FRANCIS CUDDY: CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS" on the pebbled glass above the midway point of my door. "That's right."

The woman now shuffled over the threshold. "I thought there'd be, like, a secretary, you know?"

The influence of television. "If I had an assistant of any kind, I'd have to charge twice my hourly rate."

The woman nodded uncertainly, as though she'd have preferred to hear that my assumed secretary was home sick, but she still came fully into view, closing the door behind her. She shrugged out of the heavy coat that Decembers in Boston require, which gave me a chance to gauge her.

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About thirty and medium height, with a stolidness beyond baby-fat. Matte-brown hair framed a face that once had battled acne and lost, leaving a pitted surface makeup didn't quite cover. Her eyes—brown also, as she approached my desk—appeared bloodshot, which I sensed was from crying over some recent tragedy rather than from drowning it with a bottle.

"I'm Tamara Sinclair, but everybody calls me Tammy."

She extended her right hand and we shook, the surname ringing a vague bell.

As Sinclair settled into one of the two client chairs across from me, I sat back down in mine. "What can I do for you?"

She fidgeted a bit, as most people will in talking with a private investigator. "It's about my father. And his murder."

The penny dropped. "Professor Brant Sinclair, at Corbin University?"

"Yes."

I'd had a past case involving Corbin, a small but prestigious school past Fenway Park that had stepped up from "college" to "university" during the interim. "The news stories said your father was killed in his loft apartment last week, apparently by a burglar?"

"So the police think." An emphatic shake of her head, the eyes closing for what I thought might be a wave of tears. But when the lids raised again, there was more fire than water in them. "I know different, though those same police don't want to hear it."

"Who's the homicide detective on the case?"

"A man named Guinness. He called himself 'Sergeant Detective' Guinness."

A quirk of the Boston department, placing rank before duty. I'd dealt with Guinness while he was still just a patrolman in plainclothes, and I didn't think his promotion to sergeant would have made him any nicer.

Or smarter.

I drew a legal pad from the side of my desk. "Ms. Sinclair, what makes you 'know different' about your father's death?"

My apparent client resettled in her chair, less fidgety now and getting down to business, the fire in her eyes banking but not yet burning out. "After the police . . . took down all that yellow tape from Dad's loft door?"

Jeremiah Healy is the author of 18 crime novels (including *Turnabout*, a 2005 Leisure Books mass-market reprint) and over 60 short stories, some of each under his pseudonym "Terry Devane." He was the first North-American president of the International Association of Crime Writers and also the American Guest of Honour at the 35th Bouchercon World Mystery Convention in Toronto. ¶

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Sinclair seemed to be prompting me. "Released the crime scene, you mean?"

"Yes. I went in there to . . . well, you know, get his things. And there were some valuable items missing, yes, like a Goya print and some small statuary. But also oddities, things no random 'burglar' would care about. Or probably even notice."

"Such as?"

"Dad was very proud of earning a Phi Beta Kappa key in college, an honor he always believed launched him as an alpha."

I was getting a little lost in her Greek letters. "An alpha . . . ?"

"Dad's field was zoology, and within that, the study of wolves. In every pack, there's an 'alpha' male who leads the rest by personality and will. Dad always thought that his gaining Phi Beta Kappa status would make him the leader of any organization he might join."

One way of looking at life. "And did it?"

A nod as emphatic as her earlier head shake. "Dad used to say that believing was more than half the battle. That belief—that bedrock certainty—would produce the 'aura' that let every other 'wolf' know that Dad was the indisputable alpha in every situation."

I began to have the feeling that "alpha" in her father's context might translate to "egomaniac" in normal English. "This key is missing, then?"

"Yes. And its chain, too. When Dad would wear his best suit—and only his best, because of his reverence for that key and what it represented—he'd always thread the chain . . ." Sinclair demonstrating with several fingers on her own clothing, ". . . through a buttonhole on his vest, so the key would be visible."

Just in case the other wolves missed the "aura" part, I supposed. "So, your father favored three-piece suits?"

"No." Sinclair now looked down at her fingers and seemed to silently order them to be still. "No, only one three-piece suit—this year's model was a gray herringbone—to wear on special occasions with the key. And the suit is missing, too."

"Could it be at the cleaners?"

Sinclair barely deflated. "Maybe, though I didn't find any claim ticket in his recent papers. But the Phi Beta Kappa key and its chain? No way he'd let them out of his possession. And even the Goya print and the statuary I mentioned? All involved wolves."

She had a point there. "Are you an only child?"

Another closing of the eyes. "I am now." Sinclair opened them again, but this time, no fire. "After me, my mother had a son, Colin. But she died giving birth to him, and three years ago, my brother committed suicide when his grades weren't going to get him into what Dad felt was a sufficiently prestigious grad program."

Didn't take much to fill in the blanks on how it could happen. "Ms. Sinclair, I'm sorry."

She squared her shoulders, let out a ragged breath. "No need to

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be. You couldn't have prevented it. You see, Dad truly believed in this 'alpha wolf' self-image that he had. And an alpha is supposed to breed and produce next-generation alphas to lead the pack." A grunt that, in other circumstances, might have been a laugh. "All you have to do is take one look at me and know the 'aura' isn't there. Colin didn't have it, either. And Dad really couldn't . . . accept that. So he pushed both of us into trying to be something we weren't, and when we couldn't, he . . . well, kind of abandoned us."

The opening I needed. "If that's the way your father treated you, why are you interested in my investigating what the police've already branded a burglary gone bad?"

Now the tears did begin to flow, and Sinclair delved awkwardly into her handbag, probably for some tissues. "Because he was all I had left as family, Mr. Cuddy. And despite his being a cold and insufferable son of a bitch, God, I still loved him, you know?"

As Tamara "Tammy" Sinclair plucked out her tissues, I told her I'd give it a few days. Then, "Do you have any ideas on who might have wanted your father dead?"

A sniffle and another dip into her handbag. "I brought a list."

Of not only names, but addresses and telephone numbers, as it turned out. If I ever have the money to hire an assistant, Tamara Sinclair would find herself on the top of *that* list.

But first, I pulled my old Honda Prelude—the last year of the original model—into the parking lot of the Boston Police Headquarters at Shroeder Plaza to avoid a longish walk in the wintry air. Slipping the guard there twenty dollars to avoid a tow, I made my way into the building. I was approaching the reception area, a raised wooden bulwark like an old district-station booking counter, when Sergeant Detective Guinness—I realized I'd never heard his first name—came out of the elevators to the left and walked toward the security turnstiles.

And, therefore, toward me.

He's younger than I am, but his puffy features and long-lost hair made him look five years older. I hoped.

"Cuddy, get out of my sight."

The personality hadn't changed any. "What makes you think I'm here to see you?"

"Congratulate me on making sergeant, maybe." A glance around, a drop in decibel level. "Now that some judges with brains in their heads finally decided that the Ubangis aren't entitled to *every* slot in the department."

No change in personality *or* prejudice. "I'd like to talk with you about the Sinclair case."

" 'The Wolfman'?"

Leave it to Guinness. "That's the one."

"For who?"

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No sense in not disclosing my client. "The daughter."

You could almost see the smoke coming out of his ears as Guinness processed the options.

"Tell you what, Cuddy. You buy me lunch, and I give you a couple of appetizers. No look at the file, just some background."

"Okay." I turned. "Since we're both already here, how about the commissioner's banquet room?"

Sour expression. "Cheap bastard." But he led me down the main hall to the cafeteria.

After we'd gone through the line and taken a table, I registered that nobody else in the large, half-full room had said hello to Guinness, or even acknowledged him with a nod or smile.

No surprise.

Chewing with his mouth open, my lunch date said, "So ask."

I swallowed first. "I seem to remember from the news coverage that Sinclair was found stabbed to death."

Now Guinness pursed his lips. "You could say that, yeah."

"Meaning?"

Another forkful of food. "Try seventeen times."

The police almost always withhold certain details, to help them screen out nutcases who come in to confess but won't have all their ducks in a row on the murder itself. "Sounds kind of enthusiastic for a burglar caught in the act."

"Hey, Cuddy, I feel like I'm turning on the wheel of life in this job, get me? When I first come on the force, it was heroin. Then angel dust. Then coke. Then crack. Now we're back to heroin again. Who knows what goes through a junkie's head when he needs money for a fix?"

"Odd choice of loot, though, don't you think?"

"What, the little statues and stuff? You think only lowlifes go on the junk? Heroin's chic, or haven't you heard? For all I know, somebody from an art gallery did this one."

"Any prints in the decedent's loft?"

"Just the ones you'd expect. Sinclair's, his student sweetie of the semester, and a cleaning woman's got a birthday-party alibi for our professor's time of death that you couldn't break with a backhoe."

Sinclair's lover was on my client's list. Which made me think about something else Tamara Sinclair had mentioned. "How about the suit and school key the daughter says are missing?"

"Look, Cuddy, I got the impression from both the people we talked to *and* Tammy herself that the old man thought she was kind of an ugly duckling, get me? And, for all I know, *she's* the one who did him."

"And then Ms. Sinclair hires me to investigate, when you already have her off the hook?"

"Hey, what do I know? The daughter tell you she *works* at an art gallery?"

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Kind of a conversation-stopper, I admit.

Sergeant Detective Guinness grinned with his whole puffy face as he stuffed another wad of food into his mouth. "I didn't think so."

I left the rest of my lunch on its plate and went out to the Prelude. Unfolding Tamara Sinclair's list, the people at Corbin University won first place, being the most clustered and the closest as well.

As I pulled up to the guard shack at the entrance to the school, I was reminded of why it was such a little gem in a city of many jewels. Coed, good academic standards, beautiful buildings and grounds behind a high granite perimeter wall.

Only problem? The neighborhood outside that wall.

Fortunately, the campus policewoman who slid open the window of the shack had gone to high school with me back in South Boston. "Deirdre," I said, "how've you been?"

"Glad to get off my feet and onto this stool, truth to tell. What're you here for?"

"I drew the daughter in the Sinclair case."

Deirdre glanced around. "Since he wasn't killed on campus, and there's no thought someone here's involved, I'll let you by. But anybody raises a fuss, my fellow centurions will toss your butt over the fence."

"Fair enough."

"Here's a parking pass. On your dashboard, facing forward."

"Got it. And thanks, Deirdre."

She just waved me on.

From a space sandwiched by a minivan and an SUV the size of an Abrams tank, I walked to the Science building designation under the name of "Jillian Wayne, Associate Professor" on Tamara Sinclair's list. The structure was red brick, the ivy climbing around its white-framed windows now browning and thinning from the first hard frosts. Wayne's office turned out to be on the second floor, but when I knocked on the closed door and got no answer, a student-type male in baggy cargo pants suggested I try "Dr. Sinclair's" instead.

I found it farther down the hall, occupying what I guessed to be a corner position that would offer cross-vent in hot weather and nice views year-round. The door was ajar, but I knocked anyway.

"Yes?"

A female voice, modulated for public speaking. I pushed gently into the office.

And into a combination of the magazine *National Geographic* and the television series *Wild Kingdom.*

In front of a fireplace, wolves were depicted in the kind of realistic taxidermy I associate with museum exhibits. Skulls and skeletons graced the tops of bookshelves going swaybacked from the weight of the volumes on them. And framed photos and paintings of wolves with their cubs—or pups, maybe?—on all three walls I

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could see.

"Can I help you?"

That same modulated voice, now obviously coming from a striking woman of forty standing behind the desk, a large-format book in her hand showing three more wolves on its cover. She stood about five-five if she didn't wear heels, with dishwater blond hair that fell to her shoulders. If this was the associate professor on my list, though, she believed in coming to school in sweats with Corbin's name and mascot on the shirt.

"Jillian Wayne?"

"Doctor Wayne, actually. Who are you?"

I've always thought that people who lead with their titles must wonder if they're worthy of them. "John Cuddy." I took out my ID holder and crossed the room toward her. Cradling the wolf book, Wayne came out from behind the desk to take it, and I could tell she was wearing just sneakers below the sweats. In profile, she also had that nose-pointed-at-chin feature that might remind you of clan Kennedy in Hyannis Port.

Handing the holder back to me, Wayne said, "A private investigator? Let me guess. Tammy?"

"Right the first time."

A smile that could have been sly or coy. "An easy deduction. I'm afraid Brant's daughter is the only one who sees conspiracy beyond tragedy."

"Conspiracy?"

"Oh, no," said Wayne, using the side of her free hand to slide some other books over and put the one she was holding back on the shelf, if in a slightly different spot than it seemed to occupy originally. "No, I don't mean in some legal sense of *cabal*. Just that there's more to the incident beyond some drug addict gone berserk when Brant surprised him in the act of robbing his loft."

"You've been there, then?"

Wayne stopped with the books and turned toward me. "I'm sorry?"

"You didn't say Dr. Sinclair's 'house' or 'apartment.' You specified his 'loft.'"

That ambiguous smile again, and a little swing in the hips as she turned back to choose another volume to rearrange. "I see I'll have to watch my vocabulary around you, sir. But yes, last Christmas, Brant hosted a holiday party for the Science department, and I attended."

"Dr. Sinclair's daughter seems to think that if it wasn't a burglary gone violent, you might have some information on who would have a reason to see him dead."

"Does she?" A light laugh, like a minor riffle on a garden pond. "No, Mr.—I'm sorry. Is it 'Curry'?"

She'd read it off my license. "Cuddy, with two *d*'s."

"Well, Mr. *Cud*dy, I suppose I'd have the most 'reason to see him dead,' since I'll now be the head of our department and probably

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be elevated to full professor as well. However, I also have the least reason, since without Brant, Zoology will have a much harder time seeking—both within Corbin and without—funds for research."

"Because?"

"Because, in zoological circles, the man was a giant. 'Brant the Grant,' a lightning rod for attracting money." Wayne motioned toward the tableau of stuffed animals at the hearth. "As colonists, we killed this magnificent beast off, and now, thanks to people like Brant Sinclair, there's renewed interest in them, and renewed enthusiasm for averting their extinction."

"You're a wolf expert, too, then?"

"No." Another rippling laugh. "No, an institution the size of Corbin is lucky to have a Zoology department at all. We certainly couldn't afford two professors with the same subspecialty. But Brant's absence will mean that he won't be bringing in the outside funding for *his* projects that allowed all our *inside* funding to be spent on mine and others' efforts."

"Maybe even close the department down?"

A frown. "No, Mr. Cuddy. Whatever gave you that idea?"

I gestured at her clothing. "You look like you're dressed for clearing Dr. Sinclair's things out of here."

Wayne looked down at herself, then back up at me. "Dressed more for 'sorting' his collection, toward reducing it to the most valuable volumes for a special section of our library."

"And after which," I glanced around the spacious, desirable space, "who gets this office?"

The sly/coy smile again. "I'm hoping I will. Which also brings us rather full circle, to my 'reason for wanting Brant dead,' and makes it time for you to leave so I can complete my task and you can get on with yours."

Picturing my client's list, I said, "Any suggestions where I might go next?"

"There's a former student whom Brant scuttled by not approving his thesis topic." Wayne tapped a finger to her pointed chin. "In fact, I've heard the young man's now tending bar at an establishment two blocks down from Corbin's front gate. Now, talk about a reason."

Maybe more fox than wolf, Dr. Jillian Wayne, but definitely found within the "predator" band of the animal spectrum.

My client's list showed the name of that tavern where the former student, James Odom, supposedly now worked. Approaching the place—and stepping around two sleeping drunks and one aggressive panhandler with a serial-killer's tic in his eye—I hoped young Mr. Odom could take care of himself.

Inside, the lineoleum was tacky and as colorless as indoor-outdoor carpeting. More stale beer than urine hung in the air, but not by much. The bar itself started about three feet inside the door

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and on the left wall; some chipped and faded wooden booths with shabby upsholstery shared the right one.

I moved toward a vacant stool a few seats away from a black guy in an MBTA motorman's outfit on my left and two burly whites wearing near-rags on my right, but with a six-pack's worth of empty long-necked Buds standing before them.

The raggedy guy closer to me aimed his voice downward. "Hey, Jim, let's have another round."

"The name's James," from below bar level, "and you're both past your limit."

Taking the stool, I could see the bartender, squatting under the bottom shelf of hard liquor with his back to me, loading a metal cabinet from a case of ale. I guessed he heard the movement and rustle of my clothes behind him. When he rose and turned, I decided James Odom could indeed take care of himself.

Head shaved and shining in even the tavern's poor lighting, Odom went about six-four and two-thirty, an inch taller than I am, twenty pounds heavier, and I didn't even want to think how many years younger.

The white guy closer to me wouldn't give it up. "I told you we'll have another round, *boy.*"

The MBTA motorman quietly said, "Say your prayers, man."

Odom acted the way I was thinking, that the guy to my left was speaking to the two whites, not the bartender. Then Odom's eyes left me and turned to the slur. "Get your sorry asses out of here or I'll put the two of you through that door."

The white guy doing all the talking took one of his empty Bud bottles by its neck and smashed the base on the bar, coming up with a nasty weapon for gouging and disfiguring. Back in the military police, I'd been taught how to deal with such, but this wasn't my place, much less my fight.

Odom acted like it was his. Taking a wipe-towel from the sink in front of him, he wrapped it tight around his right hand, which to me meant he was a lefty. Then Odom vaulted on his flat left palm over the bar, catching the surprised and beer-slowed guy in the shoulder with the ball of his foot. The guy went over as Odom landed catlike on the linoleum. The guy's friend, though, dropped off his stool and scooped the broken bottle into his own right hand, coming up quickly to jab at Odom with it.

Odom used his towel-wrapped hand to parry the first two thrusts, then on the third brought both forearms together in an X, the white guy's wrist being caught at the cross formed by Odom's wrists. The bartender pivoted to the side, brought the second white guy's arm up behind his back, and snapped it at the shoulder.

Classic, textbook move.

The second white guy was screaming in pain now, the first trying to decide whether to get up off the floor or risk being thrown

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through the door as promised. Finally, the first helped the second to his feet, and together they stumbled out onto the sidewalk.

Odom watched them go, then walked over to a closet, coming back with a broom and a dustpan. As he began sweeping up the shards of glass, I said, "What branch were you in?"

Odom glanced over to me. "Say what?"

"What branch of the service?"

Not a smile, but not a frown, either. "Navy. Shore Patrol. You?"

"Military Police, long time ago."

Odom went back to sweeping. "But the training, it don't change much, huh?"

"Not some of it, anyway."

Odom seemed to finish with the glass, then leaned the handle of the broom against the bar and laid the dustpan atop it. "You want a drink?"

"Irish whiskey?"

"I got Bushmill's?"

Impressed, I said, "That'd be fine. Straight up."

The motorman, maybe sensing something further that was none of his business, emptied his glass and left a ten on the bar. By the time Odom and I were alone, my Bushmill's was in front of me, half-filling an Old Fashion glass.

I said, "This looks suspiciously like a double."

Odom shrugged. "Brothers in arms, right?"

I stuck out a hand. "John Cuddy."

"James Odom." My fingers nearly disappeared in his grip. "You ain't a cop, because I've never seen you before and you wouldn't be cadging drinks off me the first time."

I sipped the whiskey, using my now free hand to produce my ID holder. "Private investigator."

Odom cocked his head, apparently confused for the first time since I'd entered the tavern. "Investigating what?"

He didn't look at my license, so I put it away. "The death of Brant Sinclair."

A slow nod, then a faster one. "The cops say burglary, somebody else says something else."

"The daughter."

"Well, I can't tell you nothing about it."

"Mr. Odom?"

"What?"

"I plan to pay for the drink, so could we please drop the street talk and speak to each other like the college grads we both are?"

A laugh, seemingly genuine. Odom looked to the door, then reached behind him, took the Bushmill's down again, and poured himself a single shot. Clinking his glass to mine, he said, "That would actually be a pleasure, my friend."

"Not a lot of intellectual discourse in here?"

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"Not anybody who'd know what the word 'discourse' means." Odom threw back his whisky, snorting as the booze would have seared the lining of his throat. "Somebody at Corbin told you the Wolfman and I had our differences, eh?"

First Guinness at headquarters, now the same nickname from Odom here. "Sounded like it went deeper than that."

"Yeah, well." Odom used his glass's bottom to make little, interconnecting rings on the bartop, like the Olympic logo. "I've been fascinated by animals ever since I was a kid. Went through the Navy to get my G.I. benefits for college at UMass-Boston, then started working my way through grad school at Corbin, just so I could pursue zoology with one of the masters." The glass stopped. "Only thing was, Dr. Sinclair didn't like the idea of a black wolf in the family."

I had my own Bushmill's halfway to my mouth when my elbow locked. "His daughter?"

The confused look again.

I said, "You were dating Brant Sinclair's daughter?"

Now another genuine laugh. "No, man. I mean, I met the woman, the good doctor thinking he had to invite me to his little party at Christmas last year. But she . . . well, you know, doesn't like guys?"

I brought the glass all the way to my lips and took a good slug of the whisky. "You think Tamara Sinclair is a lesbian?"

"From the horse's mouth." Odom stopped. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be, like, unkind to the woman, way she looks and all. But she herself told me so, maybe just . . . automatically, keep the grad student from hitting on Mr. Big Professor's daughter?"

I shook that off for now. "The same man who shot down your career."

"More put it on hold. I earn enough here, I start over somewhere else, a ways away from Corbin."

"Since Dr. Sinclair is dead and can't blackball you."

A grin that had no hint of smile to it. "You see me before? With those two crackers?"

"I did."

"I was going to kill Sinclair, I wouldn't be stabbing him. I'd break his bones by my own hand. And slowly, like one of his wolves that got its leg caught in a trap."

Odom made it sound credible.

I set my drink down and tented a ten next to it. "You have any idea who might have a reason to see Dr. Sinclair dead?"

Odom tapped his empty glass twice on the bar. "Leah Nordstrom, maybe. She was another one of his grad students."

And another name from my client's list. "Because he dropped her from the program, too?"

The good laugh, but followed by a thoughtful look. "More because Mr. Big Professor 'popped' her *in* the program. Word is, she's carrying the man's child." James Odom took my glass but not

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my money before turning his back to me. "On the house, my friend, but time for you to go, too."

Leah Nordstrom lived outside the tough neighborhood around Corbin University, but within easy commuting distance to the campus. In fact, if I had my geography right, her apartment house was on the route Brant Sinclair would likely have driven from his loft to the school.

The foyer of Nordstrom's building had a buzzer system for visitors. When I pressed the button over her name, a female voice pitched like an electronic parrot's answered. After I identified myself, there was a pause, then, "Come on up. Apartment Fifty-six."

I went through the humming inner door and took the elevator to the fifth floor. When I exited, a young blond woman was standing in the corridor.

Before I could do much in the way of assessing her, she said, "I'm Leah. The guy across the hall is an off-duty firefighter, even bigger than you. Show me some ID, or I bang on his door."

I've had warmer welcomes.

After Nordstrom looked at my license, she nodded once and gave me a jaded smile beneath bright, searching eyes. "Okay. Let's get this over with."

As Nordstrom turned to the door with "56" centered on it, I could appreciate some other reasons why Brant Sinclair, ever the alpha male, would have focused on her. About five-eight in shower flip-flops, she had shapely calves under a denim skirt that accented an athletically tight butt and breasts that pushed noticeably forward from inside her blouse. Up close, the blond hair was swaying cornsilk, no dark roots at the part in the center of her head.

Nordstrom opened the apartment door, and I followed her through a short hallway into a living room done in Southwestern pastels, a surprising amount of light coming through the windows, even on a December afternoon. She took a streaked-print easy chair, motioning me toward a matching loveseat.

"Nice place," I said, meaning it.

The jaded smile still. "Brant took good care of me."

I gave it a beat. "He paid for this apartment?"

"That's right."

"The university administration know about the arrangement?"

A huffed breath of impatience. "Look, every school has sexual harassment policies, okay? But nobody complains, nobody cares."

"Don't ask, don't tell?"

"Functionally. What do you want with me?"

"Dr. Sinclair's daughter thinks her father's death was something other than a burglary gone violent."

"She would."

"Why?"

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Nordstrom drew one of her shapely calves up under her rump, leaving the other dangling and jiggling its flip-flop. "Tammy saw Brant as the only sucessful aspect of her own life. His leaving it as a 'victim of random chance' didn't jibe—*couldn't* jibe—with her image of him. So it's not just that she *would* think malice aforethought: Tammy would *have* to think that to get her through the night."

"You study law before turning to zoology?"

Nordstrom half closed her eyes, I suspect resorting to an "aspect" she'd found successful in her own life. "For a year. But I found it boring."

"Why?"

"Because it seemed to involve a lot of conversations with plodders like you."

Plodders. "And zoology doesn't?"

"Brant Sinclair didn't."

I'd heard enough about his aura not to need further regaling. "So you and he became a couple."

"One look, and both of us knew we were destined for each other."

I wasn't sure a "plodder" like me understood that. "Love at first sight?"

"Nothing so . . . romantic. Animal magnetism, he-male/female chemistry. Denying it would have been foolish, failing to act upon it a waste of valuable time together."

Direct enough. "Some people believe you're carrying Dr. Sinclair's child."

The jaded smile ratcheted up to full wattage now. "Some believe, but only I know for sure. And I am. It's the last tribute I can give him, you see. To extend Brant's exceptional gene pool, and to provide me an alpha offspring to raise in the nurturing environment that same trait in a mother can provide."

I felt Nordstrom was talking more about breeding a particularly sharp sheepdog. "Forgive me, but you don't seem all that sorry about Dr. Sinclair's death."

"Sorry? Of course I'm *sorry*. But I'm not crushed." A shake of the head, letting her hair shimmer down onto her shoulders like the "after" part of a shampoo commercial. "Raising our child with Brant would have been a privilege. Raising our child without him will be a challenge, but the kind an alpha *f*emale must rise to meet. And surmount, to be worthy of the designation."

Talk about positive self-image. "If a death by random burglary isn't acceptable to Tamara Sinclair's image of her father, then how can it be acceptable to yours?"

Another huffed breath. "Because, as I'd hoped even you would understand by now, my image of me was not dependent upon Brant: It was my appreciation of him that honed this image of myself."

The straw that broke *this* camel's back, so I plodded on out of there.

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The night wind was howling as I moved along the row of stones to hers, and when I bent over the grave, I had to use two rocks to keep the roses in place.

Roses, John? At this time of year? Must be a bear of a case.

"More like a wolf, Beth."

As I imagined her considering that, I stared at the piece of granite. MARY ELIZABETH DEVLIN CUDDY, the dates of her birth and death far too close to each other, both in reality and in my heart.

Tell me, John. About the case.

I did.

Another pause, and I looked down on the harbor at the foot of her hill. The water looked black in what little ambient light shone upon it, the wind causing whitecaps to roll like wave after wave of an attacking army, assaulting the shoreline but not having much evident effect on it.

John?

I came back to her headstone.

Maybe I'm missing something, but how are you going to sort out which of these people—including your own client—is the killer?

I'd given that one some thought. "Try to find the wolf's new den."

It took me awhile to get the candids I needed using a telephoto lens.

Calling my client first, I told Tamara Sinclair I needed to push the investigation a bit and asked her where she worked. Without any evident reluctance, she indicated an art gallery on upper Newbury Street in Boston. I camped out in a coffee shop, catching a full-face and profile of her as she arrived at the gallery that next morning.

Then I was off to Corbin University, Deirdre giving me another pass through their gate, where I snapped Associate Professor Jillian Wayne on her way into the Science faculty building. Then Leah Nordstrom, arriving by cab, I assumed from her apartment house, and moving lithely up the steps of the student center. Finally, I caught James Odom as he signed for a delivery of beer outside the tavern two blocks away.

Then I got my copy of the Yellow Pages from the trunk of the Prelude and began to let my legs do the walking.

For the sixth time that afternoon, I laid my array of photos in front of the operative person running a storage facility within a mile of the university, this building looking like a medieval fortress, even to the slotted turrets at all four corners of the roof. The stocky, fifty-something male behind the reception counter wore dusty pants, a sweater with holes instead of patches at the elbow, and a watch-cap on his head that read "NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS: SUPER BOWL CHAMPIONS 2004." He had a dead cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth, and, introducing himself to

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me as "Roman, like Julius Caesar," he also had what to my ear sounded more like a Russian accent than an Italian one.

However, regardless of his heritage, he clearly reacted to at least one of my photos.

"Why you want for me to see these things?"

"You're from Russia, Roman?"

A stiffening, and he took out the cigar and pointed it at his chest. "Russia? Never. I am born in Ukraine. And I buy this place fair to square with loan from our credit union in Jamaica Plain."

Another neighborhood of Boston. "I'm not questioning any of that. I just want to know if you've rented space to any of these people recently."

Roman stuck the cigar back in his mouth and looked down at the photos again. "My customers, they want no trouble."

"And I hope not to cause them any. But this involves a murder, Roman, and I think there'll be a lot less trouble all around if you talk to me without the police being involved."

As I'd figured—and, to be honest, regretted—the word "police" caused a different kind of stiffening in the man.

Drawing a deep breath, he looked down again, and pointed, this time with an index finger instead of the cigar. "Her, yes."

"When?"

"Last week."

Bingo. "I need to be here when she comes next. Without her knowing."

Roman glanced at a clock next to him. "One half-hour you wait. She come same time, every day."

I glanced at his clock, too. "Does she bring anything new to store with you, or take anything away?"

"Take? No. And she bring only the first time." Roman turned and grabbed some keys I thought might work a freight elevator. "I show you where her locker."

Fewer rows of lockers and more cellblocks of walled-in, walk-in closets with larger corridors and smaller halls lit by bare, hanging bulbs above us. Roman showed me an unused locker—also with a bulb on an old pull-cord—before tapping on my target's padlocked door and then leaving me by the same elevator we'd taken to the third floor. The air was dank, even cavelike, and I imagined the storage locker served its purpose.

I settled on a position around the corner, figuring I'd hear footsteps before having to show myself. According to my watch, Roman's prediction was off by only five minutes.

After the footsteps stopped, I waited to hear the padlock unhasp, the door of the locker creak open, and the pull-cord click, throwing an additional arc of weak light into the main corridor. Then I came around the corner quietly, saying only, "Professor."

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Jillian Wayne jumped forward, then wheeled on me. "What are you doing here?"

"Figured I'd do some scouting of storage facilities, since everybody I spoke with seemed way too smart to leave in their own dwellings any—what would you call them? 'Artifacts of an Alpha Wolf'?"

Her face flushing, Wayne didn't even try the sly/coy smile. "Get out of here. This is my personal property."

I put my foot between the open locker door and its jamb. "From this hallway I can see pretty clearly it used to be Brant Sinclair's personal property, which for some reason you stole and feel a need to visit."

Prints and statuary of wolves were displayed on a shelf, a herringbone gray three-piece suit on a wooden hanger itself hanging from a nail. And, woven through a buttonhole of the vest, a short bronze chain with a memorial fob attached at its end.

"This is an outrage. No court will—"

"Actually, I'm not an agent of the police in particular nor the state in general. As a private citizen working for another, anything I see is admissible in evidence. At your trial for murder."

The color that had risen so recently to her cheeks drained as quickly. "No. No, it . . . it wasn't . . ."

"Then tell me in your own words."

Wayne looked down at her hands. "Brant and I . . . After his son committed suicide, Brant was truly upset. He knew his daughter was a lesbian and didn't plan on having any children." Wayne lifted her chin now, defiant again. "And even if Tammy did get impregnated somehow, she wasn't the kind of stock to produce an alpha offspring."

"But you believed you were?"

"Brant believed, and yes, so did I. So we tried. For years. Fertility tests, fertility drugs. But it wasn't him. It was . . . me. I just couldn't conceive. We hadn't given up, only then, this semester . . ."

"Enter Leah Nordstrom."

Through clenched teeth, "Yes. Eager, fertile, and . . . younger, too. Which an alpha male would want. Could . . . demand. Our Ms. Nordstrom sensed that. And seized her opportunity, getting pregnant by him." You could feel the glow of blood passion come off Wayne now. "Only Brant forgot one important aspect of the 'alpha' concept."

"Being?"

Wayne drew herself up, straight and resolute. "That every pack has an alpha female, too. And she doesn't easily let go of her status, either."

Picturing Leah Nordstrom and taking out my cell phone, I didn't think Brant Sinclair had forgotten that aspect at all. But I did let Jillian Wayne cling to her own "aura" for the twenty additional minutes it took the police to arrive. ●

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WAITING FOR NEMESIS

by Robert Barnard

The Walthamstow locals were unanimous when Harriet Blackstone died. Standing in the doorways of Gladstone Road (the renamed O'Connor Street), watching the police horse and cart clip-clopping away to the morgue, they looked at each other, and either said it or left it unsaid but understood: "She asked for it."

It was, in truth, only what they had been saying about Mrs. Blackstone for years. When they saw her cleaning her attic-floor windows on long ladders borrowed from Mr. Dean the builder (what had she got on *him?* they asked themselves), when they saw her sharpening her kitchen knives at the front door, saw her buying arsenic (for the rats) and cyanide (for the wasps) at the chemist's or the general stores, they always looked on these habits as hubristic, without ever using the word. "She's asking for it," they had said, shaking their heads. Now there was the satisfaction of seeing their prophecies come true, as well as a more general satisfaction. That night they had a street party, with Eccles cakes and muffins, and bottles left over from the Diamond Jubilee. Everyone came except Harriet's daughter Sylvia, and she seemed regretful at missing the fun.

"Don't get many chances for a good knees-up," said Mr. Rowlands at number twenty. "Won't be decent when the old Queen goes."

"Not decent at all," said Mrs. Whitchurch, his neighbour. "Mind you, after that there'll be the Coronation. . . ."

And the thought of the first coronation for sixty-odd years gave an added zest to the evening.

Harriet Blackstone had married beneath her, after some years of trying for someone above or on a level with her. Her father had run a failing ironmonger's in Deptford, and her husband had peddled insurance in the poorer areas of cockney London. "Poor blighter," everyone said about him when she made him the happiest

©2005 by Robert Barnard

Rave reviews for Mr. Barnard's novel *The Graveyard Position* (Scribner). *PW* says: "Fans of classic murder puzzles will be delighted by the careful hiding of clues in plain sight. Few writers of contemporary mysteries can equal Barnard's ability to meld a clever fair-play plot with satire." *Booklist* adds: "exhibiting all the author's greatly appreciated traits, including charm, wit, and excellent pacing." †

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of men. Nine years later he had gone to his well-deserved rest, having fathered a sickly but determined little girl. The neighbours suggested "For this relief much thanks" as an appropriate inscription for his gravestone, but the one Harriet had erected merely said "Sacred to the memory of" and left room for two more names. Harriet did not intend Sylvia to marry. She was needed for the heavy work.

"All men are good for nothing," she told her daughter, but Sylvia had heard about one or two things that they were good for, and began marking out potential husbands from an early age. They represented not only satisfactions of an earthly kind, but escape as well. So when the jollifications were going on down in the street below, Sylvia watched them from behind the curtains of her cramped little two-up-two-down, wishing she could go down and have a dance and a glass of something nice. She sighed, but she felt it would not do, and soon she went back to bed with her plasterer husband, and had a giggle and a good time with him.

Relations with her mother had, in fact, been resumed two months before. The marriage had been marked by Mrs. Blackstone only by curtains drawn as for a funeral, but some weeks later she had sprained her ankle while unblocking a drain, and had sent one of the neighbouring boys with a note to her daughter, rewarding him with a ha'penny (half the going rate). The note had simply said, "Sprained ankle. Come." When Sylvia came round she had finished unblocking the drain, peeled a few potatoes, cut a few slices of cold meat, and then left. All this had been done to a continual ground bass of complaint and criticism not one whit lessened by the fact that her daughter was doing her a favour.

"I could forgive the treachery," Mrs. Blackstone said at one point, "I could forgive the disobedience and the loose morals—because what had been going on *before* the wedding I shudder to think—but what I *cannot* forgive is my daughter taking her sheets to the Communal Wash House to be boiled. The shame of that will be with me to my dying day."

Sylvia had said nothing and left. But she went back at least once a day during the next week, and now and then thereafter when the ankle had recovered. "Blood is thicker than water," she said when the neighbours commented. Behind her back they nodded sagely.

"Who else is there to leave the house to?" they asked each other. When such remarks were repeated to Charlie Paxman, Sylvia's husband, he licked the foam off his lips and said:

"Silly old buzzard will probably leave it to the Primitive Methodists." So far, at any rate, she had not. All the neighbourhood would have known if she had taken the momentous step of going to a solicitor's.

Harriet was indeed a regular worshiper at the Ebenezer Chapel in Trafalgar Street, where the rigorous and belligerent tone of the services matched her own martial spirit. She was no Sunday Christian,

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but brought her values into every corner of everyday life. She had a withering glance that could have felled a bay tree, and she used it against young people holding hands, sometimes followed by "Shame on you" or some variant of it. Children playing ball in the street were sent scurrying for cover by her shrill objections, and any woman whose clothes were visibly dirty would be assailed by words such as "slattern" or "slut." Cleanliness and teetotalism were up there beside godliness in her scale of values: Boys emerging from the Gentleman's conveniences in Trafalgar Street would be asked to show her that they'd washed their hands, and the smell of beer on the breath of a passing labourer would elicit the outraged cry of "Drunken beast!"

"Give it a rest, old woman," said one of her victims. "Just because your tipple is vinegar doesn't mean the rest of us can't enjoy a pint or two of summat nicer."

But the object of her particular wrath in the months before her death was the house on the corner of Trafalgar Street and Gladstone Road, one whose entrance she could see from all the front windows of her own house. After the death of Mr. Wisbeach, the house had been sold (his son lived in Wimbledon, and had no conscience about what happened to the neighbourhood he grew up in). It soon became clear to Harriet Blackstone that the new owners were unusual. There were several women apparently living there, but no man. To be precise, the house contained no man, but from time to time it did contain men. Several members of the frail sex came and went, often regularly, but none of them lived there. Harriet soon began to suspect that some of the women were also only there on an occasional basis. The explanation for this irregularity eventually occurred to her.

"The place is no less than a brothel!" she said to the Ebenezer's minister.

"I should prefer the phrase 'House of Pleasure,'" he said. There was no inconsistency in his rebuke. "Pleasure" was always, for him, a dirty word.

Steady and prolonged observation of the house only strengthened Harriet's conviction. One fine afternoon she marched around to the Walthamstow police station and demanded to see the inspector in charge, refusing to say what she wanted to talk to him about. Such was her force of personality that she got her way, though normally the constable on the duty desk would have shielded his boss from the force of any public indignation.

Inspector Cochrane took his feet off the desk (he wore size thirteen boots, which had for a long time hindered his promotion, as being more suitable for a walker of the beat rather than one undertaking a more thoughtful role, but eventually merit had won out). He welcomed Mrs. Blackstone and heard through her detailed account of the occupants of number three, Gladstone Road, and the male visitors that had been seen going there. He took no action to

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cut her short, merely lighting a cigarette and enduring the vicious glances she cast at it. When at last she drew to a close, he tipped the ash off the end of it and got a word in himself.

"Right," he began. "Now, it may surprise you to know that you're not the first to come to us over this little matter. I feel people might have done better to talk to the inhabitants of number three, so they got their facts right first, but new residents always take time to be accepted, don't they? Anyway, we've made enquiries, and the family who bought the house from Mr. Wisbeach are called O'Hare. Their grandfather came over from Ireland to work on the Manchester to Leeds railway, and their father came south to work on building the station at Liverpool Street and on the lines going out from it. He died last year. It's a big family, and the men in it are either married or working here and there around the country."

"One of the regular visitors bears a distinct resemblance to the constable who directs the traffic at one end of Walthamstow High Street," said Harriet waspishly.

"PC O'Hare. Quite," said Inspector Cochrane. "Some of the men of the family visit regularly, some less often if they live further away—just as you'd expect. The mother, widow of the man who worked on Liverpool Street station, is not too badly off, and one of the daughters works for a dressmaker in Clerkenwell. I'm not sure I should be telling you their business, but I feel I should save time. So there you are. Problem solved."

Harriet Blackstone, after a few moments' meditation, cast him one of her bay-tree-withering looks.

"You're telling me I've been wasting your time," she said.

"I've said nothing of the sort."

"Well, let's wait and see: It's Time as will tell," she said, and she marched out of his office and the police station without so much as a goodbye.

As ill luck would have it, it was later that afternoon, when Harriet was still in a foul mood, that Charlie Paxman made his first visit to his new mother-in-law's home. He had seen Sylvia going in when he was arriving back early from a job, and he had knocked at the front door to tell her he was off to the Wolf and Whistle for a pint.

"Bring him in. Let's have a look at him!" shouted Harriet in the kitchen to her daughter at the front door. Charlie went through sheepishly and she surveyed his white-spattered and overalled form from top to toe.

"Well, you're never going to set the Thames on fire," she said.

"Such was never my hambition," said Charlie genially. "And I doubt if Mr. Gladstone 'imself could 'ave achieved it."

Mrs. Blackstone continued sharpening her carving knife on her whetstone, her way of relieving her frustration, and continued the attack. "Don't you take the name of that godly man in vain," she said (never having heard of the great man's determined work

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among the fallen women of the Westminster area). "He was worth a hundred of you. I suppose you're off to the pub?"

"Just called in to tell Sylv I'm off to do a little job in Trafalgar Street," said Charlie, winking at his wife. "You're doing a fine job on that knife, Ma. I could use that in my job, a fine sharp one like that. Just take care you don't whetstone the 'ole thing away, though."

"When I want advice from a sot like you, I'll ask for it," said Harriet. "Get off to your beer palace and your drunken mates."

"Yes, I could use a good sharp knife like that," said Charlie meditatively as he left the house.

"Don't know what you've got against drink," said Sylvia, greatly daring. "I like the odd Guinness myself these days. Or a port and lemon." And she put down what she was doing and followed her husband.

Three days later, when she was putting out cyanide against the insects and hoping it would also tempt any stray dog in the neighbourhood that penetrated her backyard to have a lick, Harriet had a set-to with Jim Parsons in the next house. Jim had worked on the roads, and was now invalided out with a pittance of a pension.

"That stuff smells like a charnel house," he shouted. "I wonder you don't drop dead on the spot, just putting it out."

"You wouldn't understand the first thing about hygiene," she shouted.

"No, I wouldn't. But I tell you, if one of my pigeons dies, there'll be another death follows on."

Jim Parsons loved his birds more than he had ever loved mortal, and his love of them made Mrs. Blackstone wish she could wipe out the entire loft of them, and make a feathered carpet of Parsons' backyard.

The end, when it came, was sudden. It was an early morning death, so most of the activity in Gladstone Road was centred on the back kitchens. Paul Dean, the builder, had left his long ladder outside the Blackstone residence at half-past six (he was not being blackmailed by Harriet, and merely did it for a quiet life). Since it was the second Thursday in the month, everyone in the street knew it was Mrs. Blackstone's day for cleaning her windows. Being convinced that everyone had a duty to do the difficult things first—as they should eat their vegetables before their meat, if any—Harriet always began with the attic windows. She climbed the stepladder, as always, soon after seven o'clock. Her long skirts did not make things easy, but she was used to that problem, and she coped with that and with the bucket she was carrying. The police ascertained later that the glass in the right-hand side of the double window had been cleaned, and she had just begun on the left-hand side, abutting Jim Parsons' house, when she fell. She dropped her bucket immediately, and managed to grasp the guttering along the top of Jim Parsons' house. The iron was much eroded by the pigeon droppings, of which

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the gutter itself was nearly full, and a whole section broke off with her weight. She fell to her death on the pavement below, hitting her head on Parsons' front step. She lay faceup, the face half-covered with pigeon dirt. The doctor at the other end of Trafalgar Street was called out from his breakfast, and he pronounced her dead.

"Any fool could have seen *that,*" said Charlie Paxman, who nevertheless stood guard in the street and moved people on when they were inclined to gossip or crow.

The police investigation was brief, not to say cursory. The foolishness of a woman in long and bulky skirts cleaning regularly the windows of a room that was never used, at a level too high for the dirt to be seen from the road, was evident to all the (male) members of the force who looked into the matter. The details of the accident hardly seemed of any moment, and in any case were irretrievable. A man on his way to an early start at a factory in Ilford had walked along Gladstone Road on his way to the omnibus in Trafalgar Street. He had seen Hettie Blackstone up her ladder but had seen nothing untoward about her activity, which he'd seen her at regularly over the years. He had seen a boy running down a side lane in the direction of Gladstone Road at a great tilt, and said he had the look of Dick Gregory, who had lived in the area up until six months before. After he turned the corner into Trafalgar Street he had heard a crash, but his omnibus was approaching his stop, so he had no time to investigate even if he'd thought it important. In fact he hadn't thought twice about it. No one had heard anything of Dick Gregory since his family had moved away, and were not to hear anything of him again for six or seven years, at which time he joined the police force and was frequently to be seen trying doors and reprimanding children and vagrants along a regular beat, splendid in his hard helmet, with his truncheon swinging from his belt. At the time the police paid very little attention to the workman who brought up his name. All boys look pretty alike, they said.

On the night of her death, when the jollifications had died down in the street and her daughter was sleeping in the arms of her lawful wedded husband, there was quite a lot of activity in number three, the house that had engaged so much of Hettie's attention in the last week of her life. In one of the front bedrooms a man and a woman were preparing for bed, he undressing with enthusiasm, she with a practised routine. They were laughing over the events of the day. The woman, in bed first, lay back against the pillow, looked at his boots beside the bed, and giggled. "Funny, all the times you've been, and I don't even know your name. I always think of you as size thirteens."

"Come to that, I don't know yours," said the man.

"Call me Collette. Collette O'Hare."

"O'Hare, of course. And you can call me Prince Albert."

And then, with the sort of thoroughness and dedication for which that prince was famous, he got down to the job. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

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by Georgi Gospodinov

Translated from the Bulgarian by Magdalena Levy and Alexis Levitin

Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov began his writing career with two books of poetry, both of which won literary prizes. His debut novel, *Natural Novel*, was published in Bulgaria in 1999, and later in France, the Czech Republic, Macedonia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and the U.S. —the latter resulting in reviews in *The New Yorker*, the *L.A Times*, the *Times* (London), and *The Guardian* (which called it "both earthy and intellectual"). His story for us has an obvious reference to Nabokov's *Lolita*.

He had it all in his pocket —the money, the cigarettes, the lighter . . . He looked around just once more, then carefully put on his bowler hat, took the bag, opened it for the third time that morning, and for the third time made sure the six densely printed pages were there. Then he fidgeted about the hallway, peeked into the kitchen and said a quick "Bye, Barbie" (even though there was obviously no one there), unlocked the door, and left.

There were two possibilities.

The first: It might well have come about as the newspaper stated when it announced the short-story contest—a contest for a crime story about a murder "for love." The newspaper explained: "The subject *Murder for Love* has been suggested by a contest with the same name carried out recently in the United States, based on an idea by Otto Penzler, owner of New York's Mysterious Bookshop." It was logical for H. H., as a regular contributor—since he had made a name for himself (although in a limited circle) thanks to this newspaper, and the editors had praised him—to take part in the contest. Yes, it would even look suspicious if he didn't. That thought occupied him for no less than a hundred

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steps. Logic demanded that he go there and give them his story. At this point he stopped short, took out a Gitane—he usually got by with cheaper cigarettes like Melnik or Sredets, but the day demanded something better so he sheltered the Gitane between his palms and lit it. The harsh, pungent smoke put an end to this first, rosy version. He slowed down, partly because of the cigarette, and decided to think over the second possibility.

The contest had been announced three weeks after the case. The daily newspapers had run with that murder, "the most terrifying of the last 20 years," filling whole pages with speculation about it. Apparently, circulation had risen sharply. Even now, almost two months later, the event never left the front pages. People were hungry for a real thriller, for something unheard of. Not that there weren't the regular couple of murders a week, but they were banal—murders of money-exchange clerks; a shot in the head, some brains, the front of a skull missing, and that was it. But here the story was entirely different. A twelve-year-old girl, "beautiful as a Barbie doll," as one of the metropolitan newspapers put it, plunged alive into a boiling mixture of resin, wax, wolfram fibers, and lead-silver filings. "As if prepared for the Museum of Madame Tussaud," another newspaper said. A perfect silver-colored cast. An enormous balloon tied to her left hand, and a box of popcorn inserted between the right arm and the torso. The most terrifying thing about it was that this "doll" had waited six days—from December 29th to January 5th, the first working day after those long New Year's holidays—before it was removed as an illegal publicity toy, or for some other stupid reason. It had remained there for six days, placed on the rooftop of an apartment building right at the Eagles Bridge, in plain sight of the whole city, next to an illuminated Lucky Strike advertising billboard.

It looked spectacular up there, its lead-silver particles gleaming, the enormous balloon in hand and a sign on a long piece of cloth beneath that said, strangely enough: "Merry Christmas, Daddy!" It was impressive, like all new things, and people looked up and enjoyed it, although nobody knew for sure whom the doll was congratulating, or what exactly she was advertising. When the workers came to take it down, the cast broke and the decaying body of a young girl came tumbling out. A few days later the police sent all the newspapers a composite sketch of the murderer, supposedly seen by an old lady as he was carrying the doll up to the rooftop. H. H. was pleased to notice that the picture didn't look at all like him and was rather reminiscent of a Cro-Magnon man, with its low forehead, thick eyebrows, and solid jaw. It had obviously been dug out of some old manual on criminology. More recently a guard at the Japanese Embassy had been killed, and the man caught by the camera, with his rough face and long hair (bearing a striking

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resemblance to the Cro-Magnon, by the way) scared readers for a while, until the police caught two seventeen-year-old boys, both sporting cropped hair, in a train near Mezdra, covered with blood. Cheap cop tricks.

So—H.H. lit a second Gitane—three weeks after the live-doll story, the literary newspaper to which he contributed on a regular basis announced that crime-story contest. The prizes in the contest were suspiciously generous in light of the precariousness of the newspaper's financial condition. There was also a promise to publish a book of the best short stories. The bait was too loaded. The contest had been sponsored by some Crime-Story Lovers' Society that no one had ever heard of. He imagined them as a group hastily formed for the occasion—top cops shaven clean, plain clothes, jackets slightly bulging on the left. No jury was announced, but rumors mentioned the names of a few university instructors. It was quite possible that even if the contest was a setup, the jury and the newspaper's editors didn't know it, and did not at all suspect that the killer could be someone inside their literary circle, or a maniac who loved describing his deeds.

Were cops capable of understanding anything about fiction, or did they read everything as a confession, as a deposition? Could they ever have heard of Humbert Humbert?

H.H. stopped in front of the editorial offices, imagined (a third Gitane) the cops snatching out of the totally unsuspecting jury's hands his short story alone. The case spreading like wildfire all over the press, despite all efforts to suppress it; the newspaper editors, the jury taking the lead, discussing the admissibility of such methods, delving into the problem of fiction as court evidence. The media going crazy. H.H.'s name appearing in unimaginable numbers of newspapers. Enterprising publishers collecting all the stories he had published in periodicals. Intellectuals protesting the arrest. The World Court in the Hague . . . Salman Rushdie called to speak on the issue. H.H. caught himself thinking in titles. Enormous letters, boldface, stern print, and all of it on the front page. He felt buttressed by all of world literature, the whole world's fictional tradition, before which the cops, the prosecutors, the court, the state with all its institutions seemed miserable, like tin soldiers. No, like bugs scurrying around.

The metamorphosis was about to be accomplished. He took the six pages from his bag and read the end of the short story once again:

. . . soft-hearted, painfully sensitive, extremely cautious. Taking revenge for all the soft-hearted, the painfully sensitive, the extremely cautious.

Merry Christmas, Daddy!

And he opened the door to the editorial offices.

And he opened the door to the editorial offices. ●

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The Headless Horseman and the Horseless Carriage

by James Powell

On 1894, early in his acting career, Edgar Meynell toured Ireland with a repertory company managed by a certain Austin Brownlea, a man with odd hair. It was white on his head and black as a raven's wing on his chin. He once told Edgar this meant he used his brain more than his jaw. Indeed, he proved to be a schemer.

Business was not good, and by the time they reached Londonderry, the cast had not been paid for several weeks. Brownlea assured them their stint at the Empire Theater would change all that. But when the curtain came down on Saturday night's popular *The Ticket-of-Leave Man,* in which Edgar played Hawkshaw the policeman, the cast discovered Brownlea had taken off with the week's receipts.

Speaking of the title of his story, James Powell wrote: "'Horseless' got me thinking about negative adjectives and nouns. The Brits still use 'wireless.' Certainly carriages have been around longer than cars. But when cars went from 'stick shift' to 'automatic,' was it because we wanted to save 'shiftless' to describe our neighbors?" ¶

Old Bantry sat backstage in his ancient fez and dressing gown with frayed cuffs, ragged frogs, and stray buttons. He coughed his graveyard cough, setting the bright yellow tassel on the fez to dancing. Then he looked around at Edgar and the rest of the players. "Should have smelled it coming," he said. "Lord knows it's happened to me enough times. The swine was out the door before the Act One curtain." Tossing aside the train schedule, he snapped shut his pocket watch. "No catching him now. The last train for Belfast will put him there in time to make the overnight steamer to Liverpool."

Mrs. Foley kept the boardinghouse where the cast was staying. Having dealt with theatrical people all her life, she viewed managers skipping with the money as an act of God, like drought or flood. She understood their need to get back to Birmingham, the hiring hub of

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provincial touring companies, to find themselves fresh situations. So the next morning she arranged for a pawnbroker friend to let the players come to his side door, it being Sunday, and do business in the back room of his shop. When they sent her money plus enough to redeem what was pawned, she would send the objects on to them.

So the cast pooled what they had. Bantry's and Edgar's watches and chains went in, Vera Dale's cameo inherited from her mother, her brother Jack's silver pocket flask, and the leading lady's jet necklace. With these items in a handkerchief, Bantry and Edgar set out together. In his tall black hat with the ruined-tower look to it, and his cough, Bantry resembled a haunted churchyard. For the young actor, the trip involved his craft. He wanted to see an Irish pawnbroker in case he had to play the role someday. They carried their suitcases, for they were to meet the others at the railway station and catch the train for Belfast and the afternoon steamer for Liverpool.

Fortunately Edgar took his share of the money when the pawnbroker handed it over, for as they left by the side door, he stopped dead and grabbed Bantry's arm. Before the old man could turn to look, the carriage had passed the entrance to the alley. But Edgar swore he had seen Brownlea's white head and black beard in the window.

Telling Bantry that he meant to recover what was due to them and meet him and the others at the railway station within the hour, Edgar set off running, suitcase in hand, trying to keep the carriage in sight while he flagged down a hansom. He had his own reason for catching Brownlea. At yesterday's rehearsal, when he knew he was going to bolt with the money, the company manager continued to be beastly to Miss Dale, criticizing her acting until she burst into tears. Yes, Edgar was looking forward to catching the sadistic cad and knocking his headlights out.

By the time Edgar got into his cab, he had lost sight of Brownlea. But after riding around for several minutes, he thought he recognized the man's carriage heading back from the docks. He was willing to bet Brownlea had spent the night with a certain lady friend he bragged of knowing in the city and was now going to take the coastal steamer, which stopped at Londonderry every day on its way to Belfast, where it would arrive in time for the night packet to Liverpool. Edgar ordered his driver to go directly to the steamer.

As he bought his passage at the foot of the gangplank, Edgar thought he saw Brownlea pass by on the deck above. On board, he stayed at the rail to watch them raise the gangplank, telling himself that now Brownlea was trapped with no place to run for the next ten hours.

Edgar had missed the last sitting for lunch. A steward offered to provide him with bread and cheese to tide him over until dinner. But he refused, for he was anxious to begin his search for Brownlea.

Some passengers were gathered at the rail to watch the gray

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landscape slip away. The company manager was not among them. But entering the ship's library where the newspapers and periodicals were, Edgar thought for a moment he'd found his man. The passenger in question was sitting across the room by a portside window. Yes, he had a black beard. But the white showing from beneath his hat proved to be a head bandage that came down to cover an ear. And when the man rose to get another newspaper, he showed himself to be quite long in the legs and a good six inches taller than Brownlea. Had this been the person he had seen in the Londonderry carriage window?

Edgar was beginning to suspect he had been too smart by half and that Brownlea was not on board. Nevertheless, he went back out on deck to continue his search. Portside, he was surprised to discover an old yellow traveling carriage out of the previous century, with a crested door, lashed down onto the deck with chocks beneath the wheels.

Edgar proceeded along the deck until he reached the wheelhouse, where he turned back to look at the carriage again, wondering if Brownlea could be hiding inside. The ship's master-at-arms, a bright, brindle-haired little man in a dark blue uniform with a Zulu War ribbon on his chest, was sitting on a bench pumping a grindstone with one foot as he sharpened a saber. Perhaps it was Edgar's puzzled look that prompted him to say, "A rare sight in our day, this age of steam, sir. But common enough in times of less hustle and bustle. Think of it, sir. A gentleman steps out his front door in London and into his own carriage, which is then placed on the deck of a Channel packet with his horses stabled in the hold. So the gentleman makes the crossing seated in his own carriage and continues his journey on the Continent at his own pace, seeing the countryside and the people as they are, taking the roads he wants to, stopping or not stopping at an inn, and a month later steps out of his carriage into his own house abroad. In this case it is on the Isle of Capri."

The master-at-arms stopped pedaling, wiped the blade with an oily rag, and slid it back into its scabbard. "As the butcher always says, sir," he said with a wink, "it's the dull blade that cuts you every time." Then he got up and reached in through the open wheelhouse window and hung the saber and scabbard on a peg.

Edgar sat down on the bench, took out his tobacco, rolled a cigarette, and offered it to the master-at-arms. The man took it gladly, introduced himself as Martin Drugan, late of the Third Hussars, and watched with interest while Edgar rolled another for himself. Edgar lit both cigarettes and nodded back at the carriage. "I don't know the crest."

"Gilroy, sir," said Drugan as they smoked. "An old Anglo-Irish family. Not Cromwell's crew. The first Gilroy came over with William the Conqueror. But what I was just telling you about traveling with a carriage, that was London. Lord Gilroy had his car-

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riage taken aboard at Sligo, bound for Liverpool, with Lady Gilroy accompanying it in a cabin, of course. His idea was to get in two more days of the fox hunt. Then he'd take the train and the Dublin mail packet and be waiting there in Liverpool when she arrived with the carriage. Only Lady Gilroy wont be there, sir." Drugan shook his head solemnly. "Last night she committed suicide."

A startled Edgar turned to look at the man. When the master-at-arms brought the palms of his hands together Edgar thought he was going to utter a prayer. Then he realized the gesture represented a swimmer about to take a dive. "You mean over the side?" he demanded.

Drugan nodded solemnly. "Yesterday morning, up the gangplank she came right before departure time, a handsome woman, if I may say so, sir, with blue eyes and the fine complexion our climate seems to foster. A steward was waiting to show her to her cabin, the last one we had.

"She took a light dinner in her cabin late last night. When the steward came to take away the dishes, she did not answer his knock. The purser came, unlocked the cabin door, and called on me to witness the scene. On the writing table lay her wedding ring, a bracelet concealing a fairylike timepiece behind a silver lid, and a suicide note. The Gilroys come from my part of the country, sir. My mother lives in a village near their estate. She hears things. According to her, theirs was not a happy marriage.

"I made a search of the ship, sir, and reported to the purser that I could not find her. He went to the radio room and sent word to Lord Gilroy of his wife's suicide."

Edgar still hadn't given up on finding Brownlea and hanging the scoundrel over the rail by his lapels until he cried the way he'd made Vera Dale cry. So he left the master-at-arms sitting on his bench to give the ship one more search from stem to stern. From his small store of money he even bribed a young steward to show him the crew's quarters below deck. No Brownlea. With a growing fear that it had, indeed, been the man with the head bandage and not the dishonest theatrical manager whom he'd glimpsed at the carriage window, Edgar returned to the library to decide what to do next.

Edgar Meynell had begun his acting career as an extra gentleman at the Elephant and Castle, working his way up from crowd scenes and walk-ons to speaking parts. In those days English stage actors were of two distinct kinds, those who appeared in the theaters of London's West End and those who toured with companies in the provinces. Though it was in London, the Elephant and Castle was on the Surrey side, which meant the provinces. So when he was ready to move elsewhere, Edgar looked in *The Stage,* a newspaper in whose "Wanted" columns company managers like Brownlea placed ads for actors, and found himself in Ireland.

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Not long after he arrived there, Old Bantry had asked him whom he most admired as an actor. When Edgar praised Irving and his picturesque realism, Bantry asked derisively, "You mean Washington Irving? 'The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow' Irving?"

When Edgar laughed and said, "No, the Henry Irving who played Mathias in *The Bells,*" Bantry, an actor of an older, more stilted school, uttered a theatrical groan. "In 'sixty-two I shared the stage with him in *The Merchant of Venice* at the Prince's Theater in Manchester," he said. "Irving played Bassanio to Edwin Booth's Shylock. But he called himself plain John Brodribb then. In those days a star actor like Booth sent his dresser on ahead for a run-through with the cast. 'Mr. Booth will enter from there and advance to here.' 'Mr. Booth will exit there and you will all hold your positions until the curtain falls.' Et cetera, et cetera. The great man himself came down from London by train, arriving just in time for the first-act curtain."

Edgar remembered Bantry's story now as he sat there in the ship library, and it inspired him to pass the time improving his acting skills. He began to observe the room's occupants, looking for a gesture, an expression, or a set of the head to add to his actor's bag of tricks. The first to attract his attention was the passenger with the head bandage still sitting by the portside window. Lean and of very erect posture, he carried a handkerchief tucked in his sleeve in the military fashion. He wore boots and riding britches. This was common in Ireland, where the horse loomed large, though hardly usual for a sea voyage.

But it was the man's air of utter haughtiness that drew Edgar's eye: how he rubbed the tips of his gloved fingers together when he accidentally touched something, his glare of disdain when the progress of the ship over the high waves sent anyone lurching in his direction. Edgar had been impressed with Henry Irving's portrayal of Shakespeare's haughty Roman general in *Coriolanus.* But now Edgar thought he might play the role better.

Suddenly his subject rose and went out on deck. Edgar jumped up and followed, because he wanted to see how his Coriolanus would walk. But when he stepped out onto the shifting deck, he found his man standing there waiting for him with one hand outstretched as if to prevent him from coming closer. The man had just lit up a particularly pungent cigar. There were no other passengers on the portion of the deck where they stood.

"You took an inordinate interest in me back in there, sir," the bearded man said. "Now you follow me out. I wish an explanation."

Caught off guard, Edgar confessed to be an actor who observed people for something he might use in his craft. "Along the way I may try to guess at their professions," he added.

The man heard him out with a hard look and a scowl. "And what did you decide I was?" he asked.

"A cavalry officer on half-pay," ventured Edgar, explaining what

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had led him to that conclusion: his bearing, the handkerchief in the sleeve, the head wound, and the riding boots.

The stranger made a sour face. "I hope you can act better than you can deduce," he said. "My name is Wilkes and I am a horse trader from Sligo. And here is my wound." He folded up a corner of the head bandage to reveal a missing right ear. The amputation was old and seemed crudely done.

"It was taken from me twenty years ago during the rent-boycotting disturbances in our corner of the island," said the man. "First the Land Leaguers cut off the tails of my livestock. Then when I continued to pay my rent to my rightful landlord, three of them held me down while another cut off my ear. And it hurt like the very devil, sir. The devil. Today I bear the wound like a badge of honor. Among those who know me, it declares I am a law-abiding man who pays his rent. But I cover it when I travel so as not to be stared at by ignorant strangers. Keep your eyes to yourself, sir. Or else I shall be obliged to consult one of the ship's officers." Here the man strode away with Edgar's apologies following after him. Indeed, the actor had heard of severed ears back in the rent-boycott days.

It wasn't until he was alone that Edgar asked himself what the policeman Hawkshaw would have made of Wilkes's false beard, one applied with more gum arabic than an actor would use.

Edgar went back into the library and caught up on the theatrical news in *The Idler.* Then he arranged to have the first sitting at dinner. After the meal he returned to his reading. But when the sea had driven all but the most stalwart of the passengers inside, Edgar, being a young man, decided he must venture out and make the circuit of the heaving deck.

Dusk was falling. Overhead, the pale moon passed through a line of scudding clouds like a ghost trying on masks. In the near distance lay a shelf of rain clouds as gray as anchovies in a jar.

Reaching the carriage lashed to the deck, Edgar timed his staggering strides so that they brought him down to the railing not far from the carriage door. He worked his way over to it, half-hoping to find Brownlea inside. But the leather window curtains were tightly drawn shut. However, he was puzzled by the distinct smell of one of the Sligo horse trader's cigars. And he was puzzled a second time when he came around the carriage to continue his walk and saw Wilkes's face at a dining-room window. But the man's attention was so focused on the carriage he did not notice Edgar pass.

The young actor continued on his way until he reached Drugan, the master-at-arms, on his bench. Sitting down, Edgar rolled them each a cigarette. "It looks like rain," he said.

"It always looks like rain on this passage, sir, coming and going," the man told him. "But tonight we'll have rain for certain. This is St. Ronan's feast day. Tonight every Irish maiden who doesn't

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think she's as pretty as she ought to be goes to bed early with a prayer to St. Ronan on her lips. Sleep will instantly transport her to St. Ronan's Well in Scotland, whose sacred water she will try to bring home with her. The next morning she'll wash her face in it and become prettier than before."

"But why does that make it rain?" asked Edgar.

The master-at-arms slapped his knee and laughed at himself. "And we are supposed to be an island of storytellers," he said. "I left out the best part. They have to bring the water back in sieves."

Edgar smiled. "A happier story than the one you told me before."

Drugan grew solemn. "Yes, sir, I've been thinking about that. You know, sailors hold it unlucky to have a widow in full mourning aboard a ship. I never held with that until yesterday morning in Sligo when our first passenger up the gangplank, with the help of a cane, was a fresh widow bound for Belfast to live with her children. Mrs. Noonan wore a black veil and a dress that could have been cut from old umbrellas. The day began with a widow in full mourning and would end with Lady Gilroy's suicide."

The two men sat deep in their own thoughts for some time. Then the rain began to fall. "Perhaps you'll join me in the wheelhouse, sir," said Drugan. "We'll be high and dry there and I must relieve the second mate so he can have a bite to eat." Calculating that he could afford the tobacco, Edgar agreed.

The second mate greeted them both pleasantly and left for dinner with a "Steady as she goes, Mr. Drugan."

Drugan laughed. "There's even less to this job than my own, Mr. Meynell. The ship's come this way so many times she's worn a rut in the water." Then he grew serious. "You know, here's a funny thing about Lady Gilroy's suicide. In her note she instructed her solicitor to alter her will to leave to her husband whatever she possessed in her own right."

"Why is that so strange?" asked Edgar.

"I know the man, sir. I served under Lord Gilroy at Ulundi. Against his commander's orders—he held the man too much his social inferior—he initiated a charge that cost him an ear to a Zulu blade."

Cost him an ear? Edgar was opening his mouth to speak when Drugan added in a hoarse voice, "And it cost my brother his life." The master-at-arms pounded a fist into his hand. "Back when my loss was fresh, had I come face to face with Lord Gilroy on a dark night, only one of us would have walked away alive.

"And another odd thing, sir," remembered Drugan. "What's time to a suicide? But the lid of Lady Gilroy's bracelet timepiece stood open. If she was taking a last look at the photograph inside the lid, well, it wasn't her husband. It was his brother Wilfrid, who my mother once pointed out to me on the street. Two men, she said, as different in personality as chalk and cheese. Did Lady Gilroy love

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another? Was this why she killed herself?"

When the second mate returned from his dinner, the master-at-arms put on an oilskin and took the saber from its peg and said, "Time for me to make my rounds, Mr. Meynell. I'll be back in a shake." But Edgar thought it best to save what tobacco he had for the rest of his journey. Following Drugan out of the wheelhouse, he made a dash for the first doorway.

In the noisy dining room, the stewards had pushed several tables together, put up a numbered wheel, and were operating a steeplechase game for the betting passengers, moving bright silhouettes of horses and jockeys around a felt racecourse.

Edgar went to the darker end of the room hoping to find the man who called himself Wilkes. Could he be Lord Gilroy? He was certainly paying enough attention to the Gilroy carriage. But why come on board in disguise? Perhaps the message telling him of his wife's death failed to reach him. He hadn't been at his estate, after all, but away fox hunting. Had he come expecting to find his wife alive? Edgar hoped to get some answers. But the man's chair was empty. Perhaps he'd been driven away by the noisy gamesters.

Edgar sat down by the window to think things out. Beyond the glass was rain and darkness. Now and then a stroke of lightning linked sky and sea and outlined the carriage lashed to the deck. Suddenly, as if the leather curtains had been thrown open, an ember-bright spot appeared out of nowhere like the eye of a feral cat. Edgar thought it came from the interior of the carriage. The dot of light held steady while moving with the deck of the ship. Edgar thought it might be a signal, for soon after the light appeared he saw a figure pass between his window and the carriage. He thought of Drugan making his rounds. Or some woman come to get St. Ronan's rain on the cheap. Or was it Wilkes or Lord Gilroy? Or Brownlea? A moment later three bright fingers of lightning forked down into the water. There was a crash of thunder and everything was darkness again.

Two hours later, Edgar stood at the top of the gangplank not far from Drugan, who was bidding the last of the disembarking passengers goodbye. The actor told himself there was still a faint chance Brownlea had somehow got into a cabin and stayed there for the trip. The last passenger down the gangplank was a large, bent-over wo-man in full mourning leaning heavily on the arm of a steward. Drugan called her Mrs. Noonan and raised his hand to the visor of his cap.

So that was the end of it. Old Bantry had been right all along. Brownlea, damn him, had taken the last train to Belfast the day before, and was long gone. Edgar felt very foolish.

As he turned to say goodbye to Drugan and go ashore, an ashen-faced sailor came up to the master-at-arms and said, "Better come see, sir. It's the carriage. We were preparing to hoist it over the

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side for it's due aboard the Liverpool packet tonight." Drugan hurried portside and something told Edgar to follow. Several crewmen stood around the carriage. The one with the lantern said, "We needed to see if everything was secure inside, sir." The man opened the carriage door and raised his lantern.

Propped in one corner of the upholstered seat was the bloody head of a man with a severed ear. It was Edgar's horse dealer from Sligo stripped of his fake beard.

"Good God Almighty," said Drugan, "it's Lord Gilroy! But where's the rest of him?"

Edgar still had the train trip to Birmingham ahead of him and expected to arrive there close to flat broke. So he made the night-packet crossing sleeping beneath his overcoat in a lounge armchair. He didn't expect to sleep well anyway. A severed head can do that to you. He remembered wondering aloud back there at the carriage, "Saber work?" But another voice, the ship's doctor's, said, "No, a finer blade than that." Now Edgar wondered why Lord Gilroy had come aboard in disguise in the first place and who had killed him. Just before he drifted off to sleep he thought he knew.

Mrs. Noonan entered the railway compartment bent over in her widow's weeds. She gave Edgar a polite nod when he rose to take her valise from the porter and placed it on the overhead luggage rack. As he did, he noticed a faint odor of Lord Gilroy's pungent cigars. Edgar returned to his window seat and watched the woman from behind his newspaper.

She sat with an ample bombazine reticule in her lap. Now she pushed up her left sleeve as if to consult something on her wrist. Stopping in mid gesture, she turned her head a bit toward him as if to see if he had noticed.

Edgar could see the clock on the railway platform. "It is eight-twenty, madame," he told her. "We shall depart in three minutes."

The woman froze for a moment. Then she unpinned her veil and laid it across her lap. Her face was pale but handsome. Smiling, she straightened her back like a bow unstrung. The train got under way without any other passengers entering the compartment.

As the railway yard gave way to countryside, Edgar tried a bit of business he'd worked out for his role as Hawkshaw. Putting on his policeman face, he brought his hands together to make a church and steeple, tapped the tip of the steeple against his lower lip thoughtfully, and said, "What I can't understand, Lady Gilroy, is why you left the severed head behind."

The woman had a wonderful alto laugh. "Oh," she exclaimed, "I knew I'd seen you somewhere before. At the Royal in Sligo. You were what's-his-name in *The Ticket-of-Leave Man.* You were very good, though a bit young for the part."

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Edgar blushed and tried again. "What I meant, Lady Gilroy, was that you and Wilfrid Gilroy disposed of the body. But why leave the head?"

Determination overtook Lady Gilroy's smile. "First of all," she insisted, "I killed my husband alone. Wilfrid had no part in this. Nor do I regret what I did.

"Oh, yes, when I married my husband I quickly discovered what a terrible mistake I'd made. Have you heard of the French marquis who refused to take Holy Communion unless the wafer had his coat of arms imprinted on it? That was my husband Tancred."

"A haughty man," Edgar agreed. "I can certainly testify to that. He came aboard disguised as a Sligo horse dealer."

She laughed. "He was doing his Wilkes, was he? That was the nom de guerre he used when whoring around the countryside." Looking away for a moment, she said, "My marriage was my mistake. But I am no crybaby. I was prepared to live with it. After all, I can give as good as I get, which kept him civil toward me. But then his brother came for an extended stay. Wilfrid was a fine, sensitive man, though of a weak and indecisive nature. We fell in love. My demand for a divorce was such a shock for Tancred it was only his fear of discovery and the indignities of a public trial that stayed his hand from killing us on the spot. So instead he made our lives as miserable as he could. Wilfrid bore his many humiliations better than I.

"When I could bear things no more I decided to offer Tancred an opportunity to kill us and get away scot-free. One day when he was away fox hunting with the Manor Hamilton pack, I ordered the carriage loaded on the Belfast steamer. Next I sent a telegram in our estate agent's name informing Tancred his wife and brother had left together for the Continent. It wasn't that difficult to predict his reaction. In a rage, Tancred set out for Londonderry to intercept the steamer and kill us both."

Edgar understood. "What he didn't know was that you'd faked your suicide the night before."

"Correct," she said. "And that Wilfrid wasn't involved at all. For the suicide business I came on board at Sligo as the widow Noonan, in premature mourning. Then I changed and slipped ashore amid the coming and going of people seeing other people off. Later I returned as myself. After staging my own suicide, I slept in Mrs. Noonan's cabin. Yesterday morning, before we reached Londonderry, I dressed up in the black veil, took the cane and a picnic hamper of biscuits and water, and settled into the carriage.

"When he couldn't find us on board, Tancred would assume we were trysting in the carriage. That's where he meant to kill us, caught in an amorous embrace. But Tancred needed darkness if he was to escape the punishment for his crime. He would wait. But I knew he would be watching the carriage. So I smoked one of Tancred's terrible cigars which Wilfrid was so partial to, in case my

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husband came creeping about.

"When I thought it was dark enough for Tancred to risk it, I opened the leather curtains toward the ship and lit another filthy cigar for Tancred to see." Lady Gilroy brought her fists side by side and moved them apart as if pulling the blade from the sword cane. She held the blade hand low. "Then I waited," she said. "Before long I saw a shape move across the deck toward me. I heard the handle of the door turn. Suddenly the door flew open and Tancred thrust himself into the carriage, revolver in hand. Just then three strokes of lightning illuminated the scene. Surprised to find me alone, he opened his mouth to utter some blasphemy when I shoved my blade up and into his heart.

"I lowered his dead body down onto the deck against a scupper-hole. When I had recovered my breath, I stepped down out of the carriage, put a foot on his chest, and, sword in hand, I severed his head from his body. I tumbled the rest of him through the railing into the sea. Then I threw the sword cane, the picnic basket, the fake beard which I stripped from his chin, and those damned cigars after it. When we reached Belfast hours later, I left the ship as Mrs. Noonan."

"And your leaving your wealth to a husband you despised?" asked Edgar.

"To give a certain authenticity to my suicide," she said. "Of course I knew Tancred would never live to read the letter. And his estate would pass to Wilfrid."

"And the business of the severed head?"

"I had a score to settle," she replied. "Besides, the object in question proved beyond a doubt that Lord Gilroy was dead."

"And now?"

"Now I shall go to Capri and wait. My suicide will distress Wilfrid. But when he learns his brother has been murdered he will understand what I have done. Once the estate is in order, he will join me in Capri. I think by train would be best. There we'll marry and I will be Lady Gilroy again."

What if Wilfrid didn't come? Edgar wanted to ask. But another look at the formidable woman and he knew the man would not dare stay away. Was this woman guilty of murder or had she only acted in self-defense? Edgar was happy he did not have to make that decision. "I wish you a happy life, madame," he said.

"And I you," she said with a tired smile. With the words she removed her hand from the reticule beneath her widow's veil, where it had remained during their conversation, and he realized what she had been holding. In her catalog of the things she had thrown overboard after killing her husband, she had not mentioned his revolver.

Edgar felt a sudden need for a cigarette. Excusing himself, he went out into the passageway. At the end of the railway carriage, he took out his tobacco and tried to roll himself a cigarette. But his fingers shook too much to do the job. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

STAGE STRUCK

by Marilyn Todd

It can be a terrible strain at times, being The Great Rivorsky. You would not believe, madam, the burden it puts on a man, and I do not say this merely on account of that unfortunate incident back in Montmartre. In all honesty, who could have predicted that our volunteer from the audience had only recently been released from an institution? Indeed, it wasn't until he threw off his clothes and began braying like a donkey that I had so much as an inkling.

Of course, much of the problem lies in the word "Great." You have no *idea* of the responsibilities that are heaped upon my shoulders because of that one tiny word! And when the expectations of the audience are already raised to the highest level, you will appreciate that any failure to carry through is apt to induce missile-throwing of an accuracy that Wild Bill Hickok's Indian show would be proud of.

Not that the fault was ours, I might add. This was Salzburg, and I swear the wires for the levitation act in that little fleapit were used by Noah for winching up elephants onto the Ark and could not have seen a single sliver of grease on them since. This is the problem when travelling performances book their venues six months in advance. Theatres change hands, so you never know

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what you might get, and in Salzburg, Pepé, our resident dwarf, was forever having to shin up those wires to release Mimi while I entertained the crowds with anecdotes of our travels and pretended that lengthy levitation was part of the act. But that night—the night the wire snapped and pinged poor Mimi into the wings—those Austrians really showed their skills in the throwing department. No doubt their dexterity is honed from generations of hurling objects across deep Alpine valleys (hams, cows, cheeses—who knows?), but all the same, six stitches in a dwarf is no laughing matter.

"When I wrote 'The Great Rivorsky' (*EQMM* 8/01), I fully intended him to be a one-off," Marilyn Todd told us. "But that's the trouble when you write about a magician. You just can't make him disappear! So here he is again . . . still with an eye for the ladies." Ms. Todd is also the author of the Claudia Sefarius series. See *Widow's Pique* ('04).

Flawed translation doesn't help, either. With your breeding and education you will naturally be aware that the German for great is *grosse.* Imagine my horror, then, when we arrived in Lyon to find that some inept Frog had used my Berlin posters as the basis for his translation, stupidly putting an "a" in place of the "o" and thus urging the crowds to flock to The FAT Rivorsky. Alas, it was only under the first deluge of distressed fruit that the matter was brought to my notice, but frankly I blame the French for paying to gawp at grotesque overweight freaks. In fact, had it not been for my assistant, Inga, being hit square in the eye with an overripe greengage, I would have said it served those Lyonnaises right.

Yes, yes, of course I comforted poor little Inga. Under the circumstances, it was only natural to loosen her corset, and can I help it if she later took it upon herself to show me more than just her appreciation? She has a magnificent . . . constitution, does Inga, and as you know from experience, *ma chère comtesse,* I do have an eye for the ladies.

Ah, you are admiring the photograph of the dear departed, I see. Beautiful, was she not? Such hair! Such cheekbones! Such embonpoint! Dead, madam? No, no, my dear wife isn't dead, she merely departed. Somewhere between Stockholm and Vienna, if I remember correctly, and my, how I miss her. My wife was the best contortionist this side of the Urals, and no woman before or after could fold herself up inside that little box you see in the corner and have me walk offstage with her tucked under my arm.

Now, then, Contessa, my deepest apologies, since we seem to have digressed, but as always with good conversation, one topic tends to roll into another, does it not? Where were we? Of course.

It started with your coming backstage to compliment me on my

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magic show, discussing the complexities of making elephants disappear over the champagne and the dangers of catching bullets in the teeth over the caviar (and here I must both thank and compliment you on your extreme generosity). Then, if my memory serves me correctly, the talk switched to my skills as a mesmerist before moving on to my mind-reading act, sawing the lady in half, thrusting swords into the basket in which my assistant is crouching, until finally the focus turned to the somewhat unusual subject of poison.

For—and forgive me if I have this wrong, madam—but you did come here this evening to kill me, did you not?

Smelling salts! Quick, quick, someone fetch smelling salts! Not me, Pepé, you imbecile! It's *la comtesse italienne* who has swooned—but look, she's coming round. Would you mind fetching some water?

Ah, you would prefer something stronger, Contessa? I quite understand, and as luck would have it, I happen to have a bottle of vodka right here in my trunk, because, in this business, one never knows when liquid fortification might come in useful, and frankly, I think I will join you.

Yes, yes, thank you, Pepé, you may go now—although if you wouldn't mind closing the door as you leave, the lady and I would like a little privacy—oh, and Pepé: Before you slope off to that tavern off the Boulevard de la Reine (and don't think I don't know about you and that strumpet from the *Comédie*—just make sure you don't get her pregnant like you did those Siamese twins in Milan), would you mind frisking the footlights boy before he leaves?

Five nights in succession, Contessa, that boy walked out into the rain, snug inside his long flowing cape. Indeed, it wasn't until I searched for our missing rabbit that I discovered the scoundrel had been robbing me blind of my capes. Silk linings, too. Personally, I would have fired the rogue on the spot, but the theatre manager insists footlight skills are hard to find here in Marseille, and who knows? Perhaps working with gas all day affects the boy's brains.

There. A cushion under your feet will soon ease the nausea, and maybe another vodka will settle the—? My, my, it's not every day one sees countesses swigging straight from the bottle, but I think we both agree that attempted murder counts as exceptional circumstances. But rest assured, madam, your enthusiastic thirst-quenching will remain our little secret. Ah, yes. Discretion . . . I see from your sudden upraising of eyebrows that you thought I was about to elaborate on the subject of secrets, and so I shall, madam, so I shall. *But not yet.* For like all good magicians, the knack comes from laying the groundwork, a principle I instill in every young person wishing to study the art of illusion. The more solid the foundations, the stronger the act—and the stronger the act, the more breathtaking the denouement. The Great Rivorsky would be merely Rivorsky, were it not for the long hours spent on

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detailed observation, rehearsal, and training, and without the "Great," how could I have hoped to perform before the court of the Russian Tsar, give private shows to Bertie, Prince of Wales, or entertain the very cream of European aristocracy?

Which, of course, brings us back to discretion. I have, as I say, rubbed shoulders with the best of them (and that Austrian archduke, Francis Ferdinand, will go far, mark my words, for I doubt we've heard the last of that gentleman). But as I was saying, it is because I have a certain rapport with the ladies—it is my life's mission to make people happy, after all—it would not be a lie to say that more than one blue-blooded filly has twiddled my moustache during the course of my tours.

I cannot deny that this was often a cause of friction between myself and the dear departed, especially since I am egalitarian when it comes to romance and do not differentiate between patrician blood and plebeian. However, it was the circus that separated me from my wife, in particular the lure of a certain lion tamer from Stamboul, but that is irrelevant.

The point is, I am well used to duchesses, countesses, princesses, and the like coming backstage to compliment me on my show, and not all of them were as charming and attractive as you. (By no means.) But you were the first, madam, to make overtures without the slightest twinkle in your eye. Indeed, I have seen generals draw up battle campaigns with more humour and flair, although none, I admit, with quite such dogged determination.

And only a fool would not stop to ask himself why.

At this stage, I think we need to backtrack. Perhaps, though, when you have paused with the bottle, you might allow me a snifter before I continue? After all, it is not every day a man meets his own killer . . .

Ah, that's better. Please don't think I didn't appreciate the champagne you brought earlier, but the thing about vodka is that it goes *smack!* to where it is needed. Straight to the point, as it were—unlike me. But then, as a magician of certain renown, I do have to be aware of my own shortcomings, just as I am aware of my strengths.

Which brings us back to the matter of observation.

I cannot (obviously!) read minds. What I can read are reactions, and over the years I have trained myself to observe the tiniest changes in facial muscles, eye responses, body language, and human behaviour. From this, I have honed an act in which I can "predict" all manner of things, ranging from what people have in their pockets to the words they have already written on a board I have not seen. None of the volunteers suspects that subliminal messages have already been planted both on the stage and inside their heads, and my mind-reading act both reinforces The Great Rivorsky's invincibility and serves as an interlude between what

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are, quite frankly, some very dangerous stunts.

I am not sure whether your eyes are glazing over due to the vodka or what you perceive to be another digression, but I merely wish to stress that, as a matter of course, I miss nothing. Everything that passes before me is absorbed, filed away in a corner of my professional mind, and some of it will be used though most of it will not, but nothing is ever discarded.

Take that scene at the train station.

Innocuous enough. As The Great Rivorsky's entourage disembarks, so a file of chained prisoners shuffles along on the adjacent platform. Even without the presence of a heavily armed guard, it was obvious that these were not petty criminals on the move, but dangerous men bound for transportation, and a dirtier, smellier, uglier bunch of fellows I have not seen in my life. Perhaps it was the effect of the steam swirling from the locomotives, but to my mind it was as though their hideous crimes formed one vast aura of menace around them, and as they shambled along, rage and bitterness etched on their faces, one realised that, if by some sudden chance they broke free from their shackles, they would happily jump the nearest individual to demand money with menaces and place no value whatsoever on human life.

Except one.

The one at the end.

He stood out, not because he was smaller or taller than the rest, or any the less ugly—there is nothing attractive about a scar bisecting a man's eye—but because of his expression. There was none of the others' surliness distorting his features, no feral glint in his eye, none of the constantly watching for opportunities for the chance to escape. Instead, there was an air of resignation about him that was lacking among the other convicts, an air of what one might almost call *calmness.*

All of this, as I say, was absorbed whilst supervising the discharging of assistants, trunks, animals, and boxed scenery—tasks I frankly cannot afford to delegate, since this wouldn't be the first time poor Pepé's been left behind on a train. Being small, he snuggles into the luggage rack quite compactly and, being Spanish, it takes nothing short of an explosion to wake him. Nevertheless, as two of the guards passed us, I could not fail to catch the words "Devil's Island," and I confess, madam, a cold shiver ran down my back.

Devil's Island! That abomination of a penal settlement in that godforsaken corner of the Atlantic Ocean where only the most hardened of criminals is despatched and where the combination of noxious climate, brutal conditions, and hard labour has claimed the lives of hundreds of prisoners over the years. With its reputation as a place from which escape is impossible, the island is aptly named. *Few who are sent to Devil's Island ever return.*

But as our little group disembarked at the station, there was no

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time to dwell on the fate of those wretches who had condemned themselves to Hell through their own crimes. That clumsy oaf of a station porter had dropped the properties box on its head, so that swords, knives, and pistols were bouncing over the platform like raindrops. With so many women and small children in the vicinity, it was imperative we gather the weapons up fast, because The Great Rivorsky never pushes blunt swords into the basket in which his assistant is crouched, and to prove their deadliness I always slice a melon in half before we start. I repeat, some of my acts are extremely dangerous.

So there we were, in total chaos, when suddenly there was a shout.

"Look out!" a voice cried. "Look out behind you!"

Without doubt, madam, that warning saved lives. The first chain of convicts had seen the box drop and in the blink of an eye were charging down on the weapons. There is no doubt in my mind that those devils would have used the knives to hold innocent civilians hostage, killing us if their demands were not met, for these are men with nothing to lose and everything to fight for—except, of course, the salvation of their souls, where the battle is already lost.

But at the warning, I spun round and, realising immediately the danger that was unfolding, began kicking the weapons under the wheels of the train, out of harm's way. But the prisoners were gaining faster than I could scatter the blades and the guards were only beginning to shoulder their rifles. Thank the Lord, bloodshed was averted when a judicious dwarf lunged for their collectively bound ankles, collapsing the criminal chain in one pounce.

Pepé and I made the headlines. Unfortunately for him, poor little chap, you cannot always see Pepé on account of the fact that editors tend to crop photographs to fit the available space, but the point is, The Great Rivorsky made the front page. Exactly how advantageous this was I cannot stress too strongly, although full houses and additional performances were not a foregone conclusion until the following day, when I was back in the headlines (sans dwarf this time) for correcting a miscarriage of justice.

You see, Contessa, the first thing I did once the convicts had been subdued was to let the captain of the guard know who was responsible for saving our lives. After all, one doesn't wish to think about what torments lay in store for the prisoner who betrayed his own kind, especially when he is isolated on a place like Devil's Island! So I asked the captain if there was any way of compensating the Hungarian prisoner.

What? I didn't mention that the warning was given in Hungarian? Apologies, madame, but so much was happening, even in my mind as I relived those terrible moments, that one tends to overlook certain details in the telling. But it was purely because the shout came in my native tongue that I spun round.

Yes, yes, yes, I realise that Rivorsky is a Russian name, but this is

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the fault of that Harry Houdini. To use my own name would suggest I am nothing but a cheap mimic, cashing in on the world-famous escape artist and magician, when this is far from the case. Rivorsky is Great in his own right, and one day I shall be as famous as my countryman, mark my words, but to return to the railway station—

"Hungarian?" sneers the captain. "We have no Hungarians here."

"I am referring to the fellow at the end of the line," I explain patiently, because, dammit, I know my own language when I hear it. "The one with the scar bisecting his left eye."

The captain of the guard smiles at me with a mix of compassion (owed to a man who has been in a life-threatening situation) and condescension (because the bumbling fool is obviously flustered). "You mean the Italian, *monsieur.* The one with the jagged scar on his right cheek."

Contessa, The Great Rivorsky is NEVER flustered.

"No," I tell him firmly. "I mean the *Hungarian* with the *smooth* scar through his *left* eye."

And to prove my point, I make him accompany me to the prisoner in question, and since this is no short walk, the men having been removed from the terrified public to be contained in a small waiting room some distance from the platforms, the captain starts chatting. Telling me how incredible that such a criminal should have attracted the attention of no less than two illustrious figures in the course of a very short time.

"Why, the Countess of Perugia paid him a visit only yesterday," he prattles happily.

But I am not interested in the Countess of Perugia.

At least not then!

At that stage, I am concerned only with the man who saved my life and that of any members of the public who might have got in the way of those evil men, and how unsurprising that the prisoner is neither Italian nor has a jagged scar down his right cheek as his files record! It turns out that he is indeed of Hungarian extraction and has, as I observed, the smoothest of scars bisecting his left eye. Furthermore, his name is not that of the man listed for transportation, either. Well, well, well.

But with the ship due to sail on the next tide, there is little time (and even less inclination) for the authorities to conduct an investigation. All they are concerned about is avoiding awkward questions, and to have The Great Rivorsky hailed as the hero neatly deflects attention from their ineptitude.

Ah, but I am not The Great Rivorsky for nothing. When I see Harry Houdini handcuffed and bound, then locked in a trunk secured with steel wire and thrown in the lake, I ask myself . . . how? How does he bounce to the surface in fifty-nine seconds?

Thus, it is the illusionist in me that wants to know how one prisoner turns into another—although it is the man in me who wants

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to know why. Why one prisoner willingly takes the place of another, accepting his fate with calmness and resignation.

And the more I ponder these issues, the more my thoughts return to the mysterious Countess of Perugia. Why, I ask myself, would the Italian aristocracy travel all the way to Marseille to visit a thug in jail?

I think you had better take another swig of the vodka, madame.

You see, it was pure bad luck, at least from your point of view, that the exchange was a countryman of mine, although the odds are not as long as you might think. There are a good many migrant workers in Europe these days, and be they Italian, Croatian, Polish, or Hungarian, they all share one common trait. They are poor. To feed their families, these men must leave their homelands for years at a time, to toil on the new railroads that are being built all over this continent. I am sure that, for a Hungarian peasant, the money you offered must have seemed like a fortune; indeed, in return for serving someone else's four-year sentence, he was probably grateful to you.

One wonders when the poor wretch would have discovered that the sentence of the man whose place he was taking was three times that length. When it would dawn on him that he was to be transported, not incarcerated. And whether he had ever heard of the notorious penal settlement in French Guiana known as the Place of No Return.

To continue my tale, though, the Hungarian flees the instant he is freed, no doubt halfway to Budapest before the authorities have finished the paperwork, because he could not trust you not to come after him. But it did not take The Great Rivorsky long to work out how the beautiful and charming Countess of Perugia persuaded a gullible prison guard to unshackle the Italian with the jagged scar in a simple humanitarian gesture, that he might make what was possibly his final confession in his own language. While the guard's back was turned, the "priest" and the convict swapped places, knowing that, in the frantic scramble of transit, a scarred prisoner is a scarred prisoner and, likewise, who looks beyond holy vestments to the priest as he leaves? Especially when it is so much easier to rest one's eyes on the stunning Italian *contessa!*

You almost got away with it, until some interfering showman makes headline news with his keen eye, and what do you do? Retreat silently? Go about your normal business, in the hope that the furor will quickly die down? Those would have been the sensible options, surely. Instead, you determine to kill me.

Oh, I fully understand your anxiety.

Here you are, a rich and beautiful aristocrat with the world at your feet, finding your personal life probed by some sordid little back-street magician—at least, I assume these were your sentiments?—where you suddenly risked having your secret exposed to

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the world, and don't tell me you couldn't have ridden out the danger. Even if it was proved that you substituted the prisoners, after already dropping one horrendous clanger, the authorities would be reluctant to start clapping foreign nobility in irons without a motive.

Ah, the motive . . .

Of all the tragedies in this sorry tale, yours is truly the most heartrending.

I confess I cried when I began making enquiries and learned how your daughter—your only child—was abducted and killed by a monster with a jagged scar down his right cheek. Just eight years old, blond and beautiful like her mama, butchered by a fiend, her corpse left to rot! See, I cry now when I think about that poor child, but you, Contessa . . . you do not. Your servants say you have not cried one tear since the day her body was carried home and you vowed to avenge her.

Vengeance, madam, is a dangerous force. It drives, but it also blinds, and, four years on, having finally tracked down the brute responsible for your daughter's death, how galling to find that he was due to be shipped to the other side of the world for the comparatively minor crime of bludgeoning and robbing a jeweller. A crime, moreover, which carries a sentence of a mere twelve years. For you, Devil's Island was not punishment enough for this monster. You wished him to pay fifty—a hundred!—times over for what he did to your child, and truly, I feel for you, Contessa. No woman should go through what you went through, but you became so obsessed with the notion of justice that you lost sight of its meaning.

Alas, I can only guess at the story you spun your daughter's killer when you helped him escape, although many a decent woman has fallen in love with a monster—a phenomenon that is common, if not comprehensible—and I dare say you flattered him into believing you were one of those types, convinced they are able to reform a man who is, of course, beyond redemption.

Sadly for us all, you lost your sense of perspective the day you went gunning for him and, sadder still, you lost your sense of compassion. Did you not stop to think what would happen to the prison guard who aided the escape by unshackling the prisoner? I see from your eyes that you did not expect the switch to be discovered, but you should know that he's been fired and, with his record, who will hire him now? What will happen to his family, without their breadwinner to support them?

An unforeseeable oversight, you might argue, but what about the Hungarian? At worst, he might have died on Devil's Island. At best, he would have endured twelve years of hell, returning home a broken man. Or did you think that, because you'd paid him, it was the end of the matter? That a contract is a contract is a contract . . . ? Ah, but whether you were aware of the repercussions or not, you callously deceived two decent men, and if that wasn't

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enough, you set a course on coldblooded murder.

Oh, madame, if only you had stopped to think! So much beauty, so much intelligence, yet so little common sense!

You compliment my stage show, but not once during your visits backstage do you mention my heroics, even though they are splashed all over the papers, and why? Because you imagined that, in raising the subject, I might suspect that the Countess of Ravenna and the Countess of Perugia were not two different women, but one and the same, and that you were on to my snoopings. Instead, you imagined that with a combination of flattery, champagne, and a shapely ankle you would win my trust.

Well, I cannot deny I've been won over with less, but never, madam, without those two linchpins of life, humour and joy.

Contessa, I have played you at your own game from the start and, not wishing to sound conceited, am willing to bet that the poison of your choice is strychnine, added to that sublime vintage port destined to round off tonight's repast. As little as two-hundredths of a gram would be fatal to a man of my build, with the convulsions passed off as heart failure, and no doubt when the time came for the *digestif,* you planned to have me too intoxicated with champagne, caviar, and your magnificent cleavage to notice any bitterness in the taste.

So then. Having established why you wished me dead and how you planned for my murder, what should we do about it?

Oh, Contessa! My brave and beautiful countess, I am so happy—yet so sad—to see you have done the right thing.

When I left you alone in my dressing room with the port and a notepad, I knew in my heart that you were not wicked by nature; merely a loving and devoted mother whose reasoning was savaged by grief. But no longer, madame. No longer. And rest assured, this is the right course you have taken, although not the easiest, I admit.

The easy way was to swallow the strychnine.

Instead, you waited for me to return (never has a late-night stroll been so sorrowful!), and now, my brave countess, together let us face the authorities and explain why you switched prisoners and where they can find the monster who butchered your daughter, that he might stand trial for his terrible crime.

Please. Take my arm. You are quite unsteady on your feet and not just from the vodka, but before we leave, let me just pour this port down the drain—

Oh, Contessa! The tears of grief are flowing at last. Here, take this handkerchief. No, no, I insist. It is silk, the only one of quality I have to hand, and—oh, apologies, madame. This is not the time, not the time at *all* for a bunch of fake flowers to pop up! But as I have lamented so many times on this tour, it can be a terrible strain, being The Great Rivorsky. ●

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The Philosopher

by Helen Tucker

He cleared his throat.

In the beginning, when he first started teaching, he had done it consciously to alert the students that he was about to say something important or clever. Now it was a completely unconscious habit, but still just as effective.

"Had it not been for Mrs. Socrates, the world would never have heard of Socrates or, indeed, Plato either."

He paused to let that earth-shaking statement break new ground in their minuscule minds.

"Mrs. Socrates—Xanthieppe —was such a shrew, such an impossible nag, that Socrates couldn't stand to stay in the house with her. She was peevish, quarrelsome, and had a temper that would frighten a pit bull. So from sunup to late at night, Socrates roamed the streets of Athens spouting his philosophy, with Plato, his number-one disciple, right beside him scribbling it all down on his tablet."

Unfortunately the bell rang at that dramatic moment and twenty books were closed with the sound of a small explosion and twenty young ladies scraped the parquet floor as they pushed their chairs back and stood up.

He frowned. They cared almost as much about philosophy and the Early Thinkers as they did about sitting through a four-hour chamber music concert or being in a bubonic plague epidemic.

But wait . . . one student was staying after class. Vivian Dalroy—he might have known—came up to his desk, smiling. He stood and returned the smile. If it could be said that there was a "teacher's pet," she was it. She was bright, seemed to be more interested than most in the class, and she was pretty—in fact, just missed being beautiful with her huge brown eyes, reddish-brown hair, and perfect complexion. She was tall and slim, and unlike most of the girls, who wore cutoff jeans or slacks, she always came to class in a dress or skirt. And she was interested in Greek philosophy. Some-

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The author of sixteen novels and dozens of short stories, Helen Tucker was once a print journalist and a writer for radio. She lives with her husband in Raleigh, North Carolina. She describes the situation depicted in her latest story for us as "fairly common in schools and colleges" but adds "the ending is *not* that common . . . at least, not that I've heard!"

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times he got the impression that she might even be a little interested in *him,* though she had done nothing overt to put that idea in his head. She was not one of the boarding students, but lived in town with her mother.

"Professor Penley, I was wondering . . ." Shyly, she stopped and looked down at the floor.

"Yes, Vivian?"

"Could Xanthieppe be the reason Socrates drank the hemlock so willingly?" She was standing so close to him that he caught whiffs of her perfume.

"I don't know if he was willing," he said, "but we are given to understand that he put up no argument. Just drank it right down while continuing to pace around in his cell asserting his ideology and theories."

"Then we are indebted to Xanthieppe for the Socratic method of inquiry, aren't we?"

She reached out and touched his shoulder, sliding her hand down his arm, then jerked her hand away as though she had caught herself in a reflexive action.

"I suppose we are," he said. Even through his jacket, he felt her touch.

"Apparently you do think so, because you said, 'If it hadn't been for Mrs. Socrates . . .'" She broke off and gave him one of her appealing smiles. "Thank you for making philosophy so interesting, and the philosophers so . . . so human." She touched his hand fleetingly and was out the door before he could utter a word.

Well, at least one student found his class impressive. He supposed he should be thankful for that. He hadn't wanted to teach in this kind of school anyway—last two years of high school, and two years of college preparatory for "young ladies." Years ago he had dreamed of teaching at the university and someday having a chair of philosophy named for him. But he only had a master's degree and without a Ph.D. could never get tenure at the university. Back then, he couldn't afford the time or the money to get the higher degree. So he had taken what he could get. Now he was too old to start over. At fifty-two—gray hair, slight paunch—he couldn't imagine himself a student again.

He put his book and lecture notes in his briefcase and erased the next assignment from the blackboard.

The young daydream of what will be, and the old daydream of what might have been.

He closed the door of the classroom and went home to his own Xanthieppe.

As usual, Reva met him at the door with her recital of everything that had gone wrong during the day. The neighbor's dog had turned over the garbage can again and she'd spent a good half-hour

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cleaning up the mess, the phone had rung four times with "those terrible telemarketers trying to scam me into buying some worthless doodad or contribute to some nonexistent cause," and the disposal wasn't working right and the kitchen sink was backed up with mess.

"Did you call a repairman?" he asked.

"Why should I?" she demanded. "You know they come quicker when a man calls. For a woman, they take their own sweet time."

"I'll call first thing in the morning," he said wearily, putting his hat on the hall table and heading for the living room, where he hoped to spend a quiet time reading the newspaper while whatever frozen thing she had in the oven cooked for his dinner. He had become an authority on baked boxes and boiled bags.

He sank into his favorite chair and decided he was too tired even to pick up the paper.

Had it always been like this? he wondered. Had he always felt like the zenith of failure? In college, he had been considered a scholar, a deep thinker who graduated in the top ten percent of a class of two thousand. He had always known he wanted to teach and to write, so he went on for a master's, and planned to go for a Ph.D. following that. But halfway through the master's course, he met Reva. She was a cute little thing, shining black hair, dark eyes that almost looked black, and a smile that showed two fetching dimples. He had dated off and on during college, but never seriously, because he was as short of small talk as he was money. What he knew most about was philosophy, and unfortunately, the girls he dated were not philosophers. But Reva was different. She yakked on like the current fad of chatty dolls. She was a junior, but hadn't decided on a major. "I like the social side of college," she said. "The rest is just high school all over again." No scholar she, but she had something his other dates didn't have: a desire to be with him.

And so one cold night in early December, they ended up in the backseat of his ancient Chevrolet.

The second week of January, only a few days after the Christmas holiday, she told him she was pregnant. He smiled, thinking she was making a silly little joke. When she didn't return the smile, he was stunned, shocked into total silence.

"We'll have to get married," she said. "Right away. And we'll have to tell my folks we've been married since before Christmas."

"But—but I'm right in the middle of my master's." It was all he could think of to say. His father had paid part of his college tuition and he had worked odd jobs, but once he had the diploma, he was on his own. His advanced degrees would have to be paid for by him and him alone.

"So get the bloody master's," she said. "I'll drop out and use this semester's tuition for a place to live."

Back in those days, he mused, if you got a girl pregnant, you married her. Abortion wasn't an option, because it wasn't legal. So

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they were married by a J.P. in Maryland, and three weeks later Reva told him she wasn't pregnant after all. False alarm. Nor had she become pregnant in the thirty years since.

He got the master's and that was the end of his formal education. For a couple of years he was an assistant to an associate professor of philosophy at the university, but it hardly paid a living wage. Next, he went to a private high school, where the pay was better, but he had to teach history because there were no philosophy classes. Then Reva told him about Miss Painter's School, where her best friend's two daughters were enrolled. It was a junior college and the pay was the best he'd had. And he taught philosophy. Six years later, the school went bankrupt because of limited enrollment, and once again, he was looking. His choices were few; universities wanted Ph.D.s and even small colleges preferred them. In the classifieds of an educational journal he found an ad for Barclay, answered, and had been teaching there ever since. Girls from fourteen to eighteen. Not what he had visualized when he had been young and idealistic.

From the time he entered the university as a freshman, he had wanted to be a teacher, a professor. He had dreamed of standing before a class of eager young men and women, telling them of the capacity of thought, the deep and marvelous conclusions of the Early Thinkers. He remembered fragments of a poem he had once read, by Sara Teasdale, he thought, something about "children's faces looking up,/Holding wonder like a cup." That's the way his students' faces would be: holding the wonder of the new knowledge being given to them.

But no, life had dealt him a lousy, losing hand and he was getting tired of trying to play it.

"Travis, come to dinner." Reva stood in the doorway scowling at him. "This is the second time I've called you. Were you asleep?"

"I wish," he said, getting up and following her to the dining room.

Dinner over, he sank into his lounge chair, which Reva constantly threatened to throw out with the trash because it was old and worn. (He suspected the real reason was that the chair held his firm imprint.) He skimmed through the newspaper, reading about the wars and rumors of wars, murders, murder-suicides, rapes, and robberies, and decided those men in long white robes topped with sandwich boards predicting the end of the world probably had the inside scoop. Why would a God want to rule over such as this? He threw the newspaper aside and picked up *Great Dialogues of Plato.*

Are good people good by nature or by learning? If virtue is knowledge, can it be taught? Questions of Socrates, reported by Plato.

But he, himself, had a question he had hoped for years some student would ask, but so far, none had. Did Plato himself ever have an original thought, or should every profundity be attributed to Socrates, pirated by Plato? For several years he had thought about

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writing a book on the subject, but somehow just never got around to doing it.

Time which once had meandered by in a slow walk now sped like a racer headed for the finish line.

He dozed . . .

Reva was shaking his shoulder. "Wake up, Travis. There's a woman on the porch to see you. Didn't you hear the doorbell?"

"Who?" he asked.

"Never saw her before. Said her name is Dalroy."

Vivian! he thought. Had his best student found something puzzling in the assignment that she wanted to talk over with him? He hurried to the porch.

Standing under the porch light was not his favorite student, but an older version of her. The woman had the same reddish-brown hair, though on closer scrutiny, *her* color did not look quite real. She stared back at him through pink tortoiseshell glasses.

"Professor Penley, I am Miriam Dalroy, Vivian's mother."

She did not return his smile and when he held out his hand, she ignored it.

"Vivian?" he asked, concerned. "Is she all right? Has something happened?"

"I imagine you know what's happened better than I do."

If looks could kill, he would now be on his way to the undertaker's. What *was* it with this woman?

"Won't you come in?" He stepped back from the door, holding it ajar.

"What I have to say is better said right here, unless you want your wife to know."

He closed the door. "What *are* you talking about?" His pulse had sped up some; he could feel it beating in his temples.

"Don't be coy with me, you old letch. You know *exactly* what I'm talking about. Do you hit on all your students, or is my daughter the only one to be given this singular honor?"

It took him a minute to comprehend fully what she was saying. Then, "Are you *crazy*? Have you completely lost your mind? I never hit on anyone in my *life*."

It came to him that they were both speaking in italics. But how else could one talk about something as insane as this?

"Don't deny it!" The woman's mouth curled up, but in a sneer rather than a smile. "Vivi has told me all about it. How you keep her after class and fondle her, put your hands all over her, make obscene propositions to her. If I were a man, I'd shoot you. Or, if not that, turn you over to the police. Instead, because I don't want my daughter traumatized by dirty publicity, I am merely going to report you to Miss Barclay and see that you lose your job."

He leaned against the wall, unable to stand upright. "No!" he exploded. "It's a lie, a terrible lie. I never touched your daughter! I

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never propositioned her. I've never spoken to her about anything but the philosophy class."

"Some philosophy! The head of the school is going to be surprised to find out just what your philosophy is."

"No! You can't do this. It's not true. None of it is true. I *swear* to you I've never touched your daughter."

He would be fired instantly. Eugenia Barclay gave a talk at the beginning of every school year about what would happen to any male teacher who got too friendly with the girls. At his age, with that blight on his record, the only job he'd be able to find would be flipping hamburgers. "You've got to believe me," he pleaded. "It simply isn't true."

She stared at him, saying nothing. He could feel perspiration forming on his forehead, and his palms were wet. His right hand trembled slightly as he brushed it across his forehead. "Believe me," he whispered. "I am telling you the *truth.*"

She continued to stare at him, her eyes narrowing, while he grew more and more desperate. "I can't believe Vivian would tell you something like that. Why, she's the best student in that class. It doesn't make any sense that she would tell lies about me."

"All right," the woman said finally. "I'll make a deal with you. Obviously, I can't leave Vivi in this school, and I can't get the tuition back if I take her out. Another school will be just as expensive, if not more so." She paused as though she expected him to make a suggestion, then she said, "Here's what I'll do. I won't say a word to anyone, and neither will Vivi, if you'll give me one hundred thousand dollars so I can enter her in another school."

Now he was totally incapable of speaking.

"It's only fair," she continued. "You've ruined this school for her. I'm just a poor widow, trying to live on half of what my husband's Social Security was, so I can't afford anywhere else. Either you give me the money or I'm going straight to Miss Barclay. I probably should do that anyway, let her know what kind of teacher she hired."

"Please," he said, trying not to whimper. "I don't have that kind of money."

"Then hello, Miss Barclay; goodbye, Professor Penley." For the first time she really smiled. "I'll give you until tomorrow night at this time to get the money. I'll be back here for it."

She left the porch so quickly that he wasn't aware of what she was doing until she was halfway down the front walk. He continued to lean against the wall, too weak to move.

When Miriam returned to the apartment, she found Vivian in the Bentley rocker, her feet propped on the Turkish hassock, poring over a book entitled *The Age of Reason.*

Miriam hated this apartment, as she had hated all the rented places in which they'd lived in the past few years. Nothing in the

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place matched anything else, the wallpaper peeled in places, and there was always something wrong with the plumbing. But neither she nor Vivi complained too much, because they both knew they would put up with these living arrangements until they made their second million. When they had first started their business, they said retirement would come with the first million. But a million dollars today wouldn't last very long, even wisely invested, so two million was now the goal.

Vivi was so smart that it seemed a crime they weren't taking in money faster. That thought brought a smile. A crime, indeed.

The girl looked up from her book:. "How'd it go?"

"Good news and bad news," Miriam said.

"Damn it all, there shouldn't be any bad news." Vivi threw the book aside. "I did everything exactly right."

"The good news is we'll get a hundred large. The bad news is that it won't be one-fifty. You see," she felt she had to explain her sudden generosity, "the house, the section he lives in, it all made me think that he couldn't get his hands on one-fifty, at least not in a hurry. So we'll settle for a hundred."

"That'll make only four hundred for the whole year."

"Well, the good news is that the IRS will never know about it. That's the same as money in the bank." She sat on the sunken-in sofa across from her daughter and shared the hassock. "Listen, Vivi, we've got to do some serious thinking. You're twenty-five years old, almost twenty-six. You can't keep convincing people that you're a seventeen-year-old girl. We've got to find a different type of school."

"Maybe an all-girl college instead of these la-de-da finishing schools," Vivi said. "A college that has a professor I can have a good time with. Old Penley's nothing but a nerd, straight from Dullsville. Bored the bejesus out of me."

"Even so," Miriam said, "one hundred thousand in three months isn't bad. That's a little over thirty-three thousand a month."

"Chicken feed," Vivi said. "CEO's make a million or two a month, some of them even more."

"Then why in hell aren't you a CEO? You're smart enough."

"This is easier and more fun. Have you given any thought to where we'll go next?"

"Of course. There's a college prep in Virginia, Leescroft Hall, that charges a frightful tuition. Looks like a good prospect. I get Penley's money Friday night. By Monday we should be packed up and out of here."

"Could we please get a decent apartment? I'm tired of these crappy places."

Miriam smiled. "When we get that second million we'll also get all the luxuries we've been denying ourselves. Beautiful condos, expensive cars, furs, jewelry . . . say, maybe I can hit Penley up for that extra fifty after all. Tell him I'll go to his wife as well as the

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school head. She was the one who came to the door when I rang the bell, and she looks like a real piece of work. So, Vivi, only a couple more schools and we'll have our retirement fund."

"Then what will we do for fun, amusement, and profit?"

Miriam smiled. "You'll come up with something, just as you did our current little game."

He didn't move for the longest time, just kept leaning against the wall feeling weak and sick. It was like being kicked in the stomach at the same time as being hit in the head with a hammer. He couldn't let her go to Eugenia Barclay. Barclay would fire him without letting him say so much as a word. And words wouldn't matter anyway; she had made that point perfectly clear. No male teacher was to have anything whatsoever to do with the girls outside of class. "I'll not have one spark of scandal catching into a flame at this school."

With something like that on his record, he wouldn't even be able to get a job teaching in a public high school.

One hundred thousand dollars! All of the money in the world to him. All of the money he *had* in the world. After all these years teaching, that was the amount he had saved and put into a CD. There was maybe as much as seven or eight thousand in a money market account, and his checking account was less than four hundred dollars. And, of course, Reva was totally dependent upon him; she had only what he gave her for household expenses and clothes.

Reva! My God, suppose that woman went to Reva! If his wife didn't kill him outright, she'd make the rest of his life unlivable. He inhaled sharply. His head was killing him. If he lost his job, Reva would know why anyway. Everyone at school would know why. He was caught like a mouse in a trap without even the advantage of having been lured there by cheese.

There was only one way out. He would have to go to the bank tomorrow and cash in the CD and give his life's savings to Miriam Dalroy.

He crept back inside like an invalid, hoping Reva, who was crocheting, wouldn't notice him.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked immediately. "What did that woman want?"

"She wanted to talk to me about her daughter's grades," he said. "She doesn't think they're high enough."

"Humph!" was the only answer.

By three A.M. he realized he wasn't going to sleep at all, so he got up and went to the kitchen, made coffee, and sat at the table drinking it until Reva came downstairs to start breakfast.

She took one look at him and said, "You sick?"

"I don't feel too well," he answered, and that was the end of their conversation.

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His first class was not until eleven, so he went to the bank. In all those wakeful hours, he hadn't been able to think of a way out of his traumatizing situation.

It was a small bank and he knew all the tellers by sight, most of them by name. "Thelma," he said to the lanky girl with horn-rims and straight black hair, "I want to cash in my CD." He handed her the certificate.

She looked at it. "But, Professor Penley, you'll lose the interest. It doesn't come due for another four months."

"I want cash. A thousand one-hundred-dollar bills."

Her eyes widened behind the horn-rims, and her mouth opened then closed. Finally, she said, "I'm sure we don't have that many hundreds on hand. We'll have to get them."

"I need them by this afternoon. It's Friday," he explained. "I can't wait till Monday."

Suddenly she smiled, making a joke. "What is this, a kidnapping?"

Yes, he thought, that's exactly what it is. They're kidnapping my future. He said, "I'll come back around three. Please have the money ready."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk to Mr. Herley first?"

But he was already on his way out of the bank. Talking to the manager wouldn't change anything.

A day of stumbling through his classes—but alert enough to notice that Vivian Dalroy was conspicuously absent—another stop at the bank to pick up the money, another thawed dinner that left him queasy, and then it was almost time. . . .

He had put the money in a huge book mailer that he'd found in the department supply room, and he had hidden it behind the blinds on the front porch. Reva must *not* see the package and ask questions. He went out on the porch early, not wanting the Dalroy woman to ring the bell and have Reva answer the door again.

Miriam Dalroy came up on the porch, smiling at him. "Well, Professor, do you have something for me?"

"Please don't do this," he said, hating himself for having to beg, but thinking he had to give it one more try.

"Think of it this way," she said. "You're saving your job and your marriage. Isn't that worth a few dollars to you?"

Without another word, he reached behind the blinds and pulled out the package.

"I trust it's all here, so I won't count it until I get home. By the way, Vivi has told me some other things you did to her, and I think that's worth another fifty thousand."

"You get the hell off my porch right this minute!" He had never yelled or cursed at another human being in his life, but now it seemed to come naturally. "You've already taken every cent I've managed to save in thirty years of teaching and the money from my father's estate as well."

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She gave him another of her maddening smiles. "All right, Professor, I'll let you off easy. We'll try to make do with this." She clutched the package to her chest, holding it with both hands as she left the porch.

Back inside the house, he went straight to the bathroom and was very sick.

That night, from sheer exhaustion, he slept. He awoke late in the morning feeling heavy-headed, disoriented, and still tired. Thank God he didn't have Saturday classes. He would have had to call in sick. Surprisingly, Reva had not awakened him when she left the room, so he just lay there wondering if there would ever be any reason for him to get up again.

He had been robbed. Grand theft. They had committed a felony and there was nothing he could do about it. They might as well have held a gun to his head. He wished *he* could shoot *them.*

Shoot them! Wait a minute . . . they held him up, why couldn't he do the same to them and get his money back? There was a gun somewhere in the back of a drawer in his desk that he had bought when there were several robberies in the neighborhood about ten years ago. When the robber was caught, he had put the gun away and never thought of it again.

Now he had a purpose for getting up. He rushed into the bathroom, shaved, showered, and dressed, then went to the desk in his study. He opened three drawers and fished around in the back before he found the little pistol. He knew nothing about guns, so he couldn't even have told what caliber it was, but he had made the man in the gun store show him how to load it, cock it, aim, and . . . he had never shot it. He had put it away loaded, so it was still ready to fire.

"You don't look so good," was Reva's greeting to him when he went into the kitchen. "I hope whatever you have isn't contagious."

"I'm on the mend now," he said almost cheerfully. "I'm going to be all right."

After plowing through a bowl of cereal, he went to his office on campus to look up the home address of Vivian Dalroy in the student directory. He was very much conscious of the little gun in his coat pocket.

The Dalroys lived in a run-down apartment building on the east side, neither the best nor the worst neighborhood in town. The building had been red brick, painted white, but now the white was peeling off and blotches of red showed through. Inside a musty-smelling hallway, he found their name on a mailbox, 2-C, and went up the not-quite-dark stairway. They must have been running their scam for years, he thought, so why didn't they live better?

He knocked at the door and it was opened immediately by Miriam. "You can put the extra boxes . . ." she began, then recognized her visitor. "What do you want?"

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He pushed the door open and stepped inside before she could slam it in his face. The room was crowded with boxes on the floor, several suitcases, and hanging bags. Obviously, now that they had his money, they were getting out as fast as they could.

"Who was that?" Vivian asked, coming in from another room, then, seeing him, she took a step back and said, "Oh!"

"What do you want?" Miriam asked again.

"I want my money back. Now."

Miriam laughed. "Don't be silly. You got what you paid for. You're home free with your wife and your job."

He pulled the gun out of his pocket and pointed it at her. "I said I want my money, and if you value your life, you'll give it to me."

Vivian screamed and Miriam turned pale, then recovered somewhat. "Put the damn gun away, you idiot, before I call the cops."

"Call them," he said. "I'll tell them how you robbed me."

"And I'll tell them what you did to me," Vivian said.

"And you'll be lying. If you don't give me back my money right now I'm going to shoot you both." He put his finger on the trigger to show he meant business.

"We don't have the money," Miriam said. "It's already transferred to a bank miles away."

He held his arms straight out, grasping the gun in both hands as he'd seen cops on TV do. "I don't believe you. I mean what I say."

Now Vivian laughed. "Professor, you wouldn't shoot a damn jackrabbit. You certainly wouldn't shoot two women."

He cocked the pistol and held it straight out for another couple of minutes, then dropped his arms to his side. She was right; he couldn't shoot them. They had won again. He felt like crying, but not in front of them. He backed to the door, turned, and left, almost tripping as he ran down the stairs. Outside, he looked up at the apartment. The two of them were framed in the window, laughing at him.

Driving home, he beat the steering wheel with his fists in rage and frustration. Never had he been so furious; never had he felt so depressed and defeated. He was sure his money had not been sent off anywhere between nine o'clock last night and ten o'clock this morning, yet he had been unable to get it back. He really should have shot those harpies and searched the premises. But no, if he'd fired the little gun, others in the building undoubtedly would have heard and come to investigate.

Damn them! Damn the whole world! Damn his life since he married Reva. Not one thing had gone right since then, not one plan or dream. His truncated education had kept him from getting a decent job, he would never have a chair of philosophy named for him, or be surrounded by a large, happy family, or . . . No need to go any further. Neither child nor chair. All because Reva had tricked him into marrying her. She was the one he should shoot

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for lousing up his life.

Hey, now! *Hey, now!*

The dream is parent to the desire and the desire is parent to the action.

He pulled over to the curb in front of a row of small starter houses. He didn't dare drive while his mind was speeding so far ahead of him. The teller at the bank had said something about kidnapping when he withdrew the hundred thousand. She would remember that. What if Reva disappeared and he reported that she had been kidnapped and that he'd paid two women ransom money to get her back? They could deny it until hell went subzero, but there was the teller to prove . . .

Would it work? Could he get away with it?

He would have to kill Reva, of course. He could shoot her, or strangle her, or give her poison—no, not that, because he'd have to buy the poison and some clerk would remember him. Anyway, the means of killing her was not the main problem. What would he do with her body? He didn't think getting rid of a body was as easy as some mystery writers assumed. If he buried her in the backyard, there would be freshly turned earth. If he dumped her out in the woods or alongside a country road, there was the danger of being seen. And if he put her body in the trunk of his car, even in a plastic bag, there would be fibers or some damn thing that would give it away, technology being what it is today. And, could he trust himself when questioned by the police about her disappearance, as he surely would be, to play the convincing role of distraught husband? He thought that over for a minute or two and then decided, yes, he could manage that. To get rid of Reva he could manage anything. The thought of life without her was very enticing. Peace, perfect peace . . . at home, in his mind, in his soul. Solitude and serenity after all these years of trial and torment.

But how would he murder her? If he couldn't shoot two comparative strangers, would he be able to shoot his wife of thirty years? He imagined her sitting on the three-legged stool in the kitchen, doing some mundane task like opening frozen stuffed peppers. With the little gun in hand, barefoot so as not to startle her, he would get close enough so he couldn't possibly miss, and he would fire. He visualized her jumping as the bullet hit, then falling off the stool. The expression on her face would be one of shock . . .

But no, somehow that didn't seem to be the way to go about it.

Socrates was a savvy old sage. What would be the Socratic method of murder?

Then it came to him, almost as though his idol had reached down from some celestial sphere and planted it in his head. He would put the body in the car, not in the trunk, not in a bag in the backseat, but sitting up on the passenger side of the car. That's where Reva rode when he was driving, so it would not be unusual

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to find strands of hair, fingerprints, fabric from her clothes, whatever, right there. As for the method, there couldn't be any blood. All he had to do now was decide how two women would go about killing another woman.

The killing part wasn't nearly as hard as he had expected. While she was bending over the oven to remove two frozen dinners, he slipped the noose over her head and pulled and pulled and pulled. He didn't even have to look at her face as he did it. It was not a pleasant ordeal for him, but he managed to get through it, scarcely glancing at her when she was prone on the floor, tongue hanging out, face blue. He picked her up, took her to the garage, and put her in the car. At eleven P.M. he drove out into the country and dumped her body in a ditch beside a dirt road.

He waited until early Sunday morning before calling the police. He told the woman who answered his 911 call, "My wife has been kidnapped." The police were at his house in exactly eight minutes. There was a detective lieutenant named Sidney Miller and another cop named Thomas Salter.

Their first question was: "If your wife was kidnapped Friday, why did you wait until today to call the police?"

"I was told not to call anyone, that she'd be returned last night."

"Are you sure she didn't leave home of her own volition?" Lieutenant Miller asked.

"No, no!" Travis didn't have to pretend to be upset; he was. He had to make these men believe him. "She was taken by two women, a mother and daughter. I can give you their names and address. They asked for ransom of one hundred thousand dollars and said if I paid by yesterday they would have her home by last night. I waited up all night and then called you this morning."

The two cops gave each other a fleeting glance. "You paid them the hundred thousand?" the younger one said.

"I went to First Bank on Friday and got the money out. The teller, Thelma something, asked me if there was a kidnapping. She thought it was a joke, but it wasn't. If you don't believe me, ask Thelma. I took it to the woman yesterday morning and I've waited ever since . . ." He broke off and bowed his head and let his hands tremble a little.

"Give me the names and address of the women. Did anyone see you when you took the money to them?" Miller asked

"I don't know. They live in that run-down apartment building on Boxler Street. It's possible someone saw me go in or come out."

"We'll also check the bank teller," Salter said.

Travis felt that right now he was their number-one suspect. Or maybe it was just their manner of questioning.

"Why would these two want to kidnap your wife?" Miller asked. "Any reason other than money? Do you know them?"

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"The daughter was in my philosophy class at Miss Barclay's School. She wants to transfer to another school and doesn't have enough money. I guess her credit's not good enough that she can borrow a large sum. That's the only reason I can think of." It was as close to the truth as he'd been yet. He looked straight in the eyes of first one and then the other cop. "Please find my wife. Those two women are crazy. There's no telling what they might do . . . what they've done already." They stayed another ten or fifteen minutes, asking questions about where Travis worked, what he taught, what his wife did, then went back to the alleged (their word) kidnapping: Where was your wife when she was taken? Was she in the house by herself? Why didn't he get in touch with the police as soon as the Dalroys asked for ransom?

Travis thought he put just enough hesitancy in his answers to show that he was both stunned and worried sick. Finally they left, telling him they would let him know as soon as they found out anything.

Travis waited the rest of the morning, spending a great deal of time pacing the floor. In the middle of the afternoon he had a call from Lieutenant Miller. "Mr. Penley, we've talked to the Dalroys and they say they know nothing of any kidnapping. Mrs. Dalroy said you were hitting on her daughter at school and when she told you she was going to the headmistress, you offered her a hundred thousand to keep quiet."

"That's a damn lie!" Travis exploded. This time his emotion was real. The idea of that woman saying he *offered* the money. "It happened exactly as I told you. They took my wife and said I'd get her back after I paid the money."

"We're looking into it further," the lieutenant said.

Travis spent a sleepless night, continually turning to find a cool side of the bed.

On Monday afternoon he received another call from Lieutenant Miller. "Mr. Penley, the body of a woman has been found just off a rural road south of town. The woman was wearing a pin with the initials R. P. on it. We think it may be your wife. Can you come down for identification?"

"Ye-es," he choked out the word. "I'll be right there."

There was a makeshift morgue in the basement of the building beneath the police station. Lieutenant Miller took him down on the elevator and he stood behind a glass partition while a white-coated man on the other side pulled the sheet off Reva's face.

Travis took one quick look, then put both hands over his face. "That's my wife," he said brokenly. "That's Reva."

Lieutenant Miller helped him back upstairs and asked, "Would you like for someone to drive you home?"

"No, I can drive. I have to make arrangements. When can I get . . . get her?"

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"Probably not for a couple of days. There will be an autopsy."

On his way home he stopped at a grocery store and bought a beef roast and fresh vegetables. This was one night he was going to eat real food. No more boiled bags or baked boxes. He enjoyed the cooking almost as much as he did the eating. There was roast beef, mashed potatoes with real gravy, and fresh asparagus with butter sauce. He hadn't had a better meal since . . . he couldn't remember when. Tomorrow he'd bake an apple pie.

The phone rang just as he was getting ready for bed. "This is Lieutenant Miller. I hate to bother you so late, but there is news I thought would interest you. We've done some background checking on the Dalroys and found out they've lived in seven different towns in the past two years. The girl was enrolled in schools in each town, and although she seemed to be doing well, she dropped out for no apparent reason. It seems pretty obvious that the two of them were running some kind of scam, though there was nothing about any kidnappings. Maybe the victims of the scam were too embarrassed at being taken to report it. There were no deaths reported, though, so if they ever tried kidnapping before, there must have been different circumstances than in the case of your wife."

"Reva would certainly have put up a struggle," he said, "even if they held a gun on her."

"Yes, well . . . We'll charge them with everything possible," the lieutenant said, and hung up.

Travis was ecstatic. Everything was being resolved in the best conceivable way and in very little time. His whole life was going to be just the way he had dreamed it might years ago. Instead of going to bed, he went inside his study and sat at his desk. He was going to write that book he'd always wanted to write: showing that Plato was just a copycat, and Socrates was the real brains behind all that wisdom. It was apparent that Plato had written down every word Socrates uttered and then passed much of it off as his own. Travis's book would open the eyes of the scholars of the world and he would be famous. Indeed, he'd probably be asked to lecture at the university. And maybe, after all, he'd have that chair in philosophy named for him.

Finally, he went to bed and his last conscious thought before dropping off into a deep, untroubled sleep was: *Just when you think never-ending darkness has descended on your whole world, the sun comes out and you discover that life can be beautiful.*

The next morning he felt like skipping as he parked his car in the faculty lot and went to his ten o'clock. "Good morning," he said cheerfully to the young ladies, something he'd never done before. "This morning we'll forgo today's assignment, because I want to tell you about a very important book that will shake up the world

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of philosophy."

He had just begun talking when there was a knock at the door, another unusual occurrence. He opened the door, unhappy about the interruption, and there stood Salter, the younger of the cops.

"Yes?" he said abruptly. "I'm in the middle of a class."

"Sorry, sir, but Lieutenant Miller wants to see you downtown."

"I'm sure he can wait until the end of the class."

"No, sir, he said for me to bring you back with me now."

Well . . . best not to push it. He turned toward the class. "We'll continue this tomorrow. Class excused for today."

Once inside the blue and white cop car, he began to wonder what this was all about. Previously when the lieutenant had something to tell him, he either came to the house or called. Travis hadn't been called downtown before except to identify the body. Probably it was nothing but more questions about the Dalroys or Reva.

But why couldn't Miller have waited an hour or so? Travis began to feel just a wee bit edgy. "What is this about?" he asked Salter. "And why is it so urgent?"

"I think it's about where your wife was found."

"As I understand it, it was out in the country somewhere."

"Yes, on a rural road ten miles south of town."

"But why does the lieutenant want to see *me?*"

"Because, sir," Salter said, "the Dalroys don't own a car." ●

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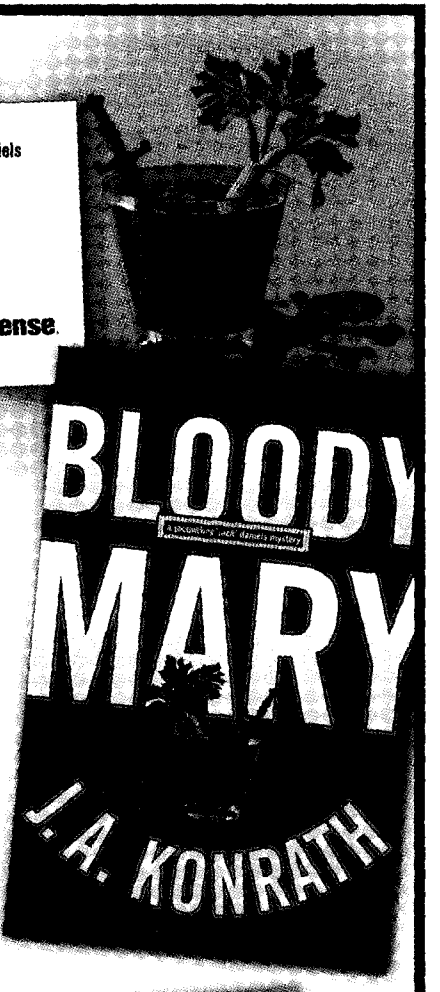

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